

PROFESSOR

BERNICE SUMMERFIELD

A LIFE WORTH LIVING



A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY
EDITED BY SIMON GUERRIER

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The war is over. The Braxiatel Collection is back to normal. Better than that, people are all making more of an effort – to rebuild, to get on, to re-establish the Collection at the forefront of academic excellence. Benny and Jason are back together. Life is good.

It's not going to last, is it?

Soon Benny is up to her eyeballs in strange deaths, sinister cults, peculiar love affairs and a Collection full of people who haven't yet stopped fighting...

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For Debbie – a proper academic

For saying I'd do

The Braxiatel Collection

‘Collection of what?’ is an invalid question. Arguably the finest and most extensive in the known universe, it is a collection of everything. The various departments of the Braxiatel Collection house antique artefacts, literature, playscripts, recordings of events and people and performances, geological specimens, software and hardware from days gone by... A permanent home for the Braxiatel Collection is the planetoid formerly designated KS-159 – now itself known as the Braxiatel Collection. Once a very secure, by-invitation-only sort of place, since being liberated from Occupation by the Fifth Axis, the Collection has had a change of policy. Now it has opened its doors to students and academics.

Fabulously rich, Irving Braxiatel is Renaissance Man for the new era. He is well read, extremely learned, an expert in almost everything, though in some matters he lacks practical experience. He does have a tendency to miss the details while looking at the big picture – details like how people actually feel about things, for example. He has built up his collection over the years – probably over the centuries. But how old he really is, whether or not he actually ever ages, is not something that it is polite to discuss.

Professor Bernice Summerfield is a guest of Irving Braxiatel. She is currently working (still) on the sequel to her bestselling coffee-table archaeology book *Down Among The Dead Men* (published originally in 2466, which is odd given it is now 2604). Her half-Killoran son, Peter, is three. He’s learning to speak, slowly, and learning how to cause trouble a bit faster.

Wolsey is Benny’s tabby tomcat. He is getting venerable, putting on a bit of weight and slowing down. In fact, he’s a bit lame in his back left leg. Joseph (so-called for historical and sentimental reasons) is Benny’s personal digital assistant. He is an AI computer system linked to the Braxiatel Collection’s main scheduling systems, and he’s roughly the size of a football. Personality-wise (and again for historical/romantic reasons), Joseph has been programmed to be ‘dry’ and literal. Not surprisingly, he spends most of his time switched off.

Jason Kane is Benny’s ex-husband: wily, technically able, and not half the scoundrel most people think. During the Occupation, most people thought he was collaborating, but it turned out he was running a scam to save children. And he organised and led the resistance... no wonder Benny and he have got back together.

Bev Tarrant is Brax’s PA – an odd role for a former art thief, whose role before the Occupation was ‘acquiring’ new items for Brax. She has chestnut hair, and you can see the scars from when she was tortured

by the Fifth Axis.

She gave nothing away.

Clarissa Jones is in charge of Administration – though there are many who can't understand why she's still on the Collection at all. During the Occupation, she was romantically involved with one of the Fifth Axis officers – the one who tortured Bev. But Braxiatel insisted Ms Jones get her job back.

This includes overseeing the reconstruction work and the tending of the garden and grounds. She is a lady of uncertain age and unspecified background. If it seems she has something to hide, it is probably because she does. She is six feet tall and seems almost as wide. She wears horn-rimmed glasses on a chain round her neck and woe betide you if she has cause to put them on...

Adrian Wall is the construction manager. He is in charge of all the ongoing work on the Collection, and reports to Ms Jones. Like most of his workforce, Wall is a Killoran – a seven-foot-tall cross between an ape and an upright wolf complete with fangs, snout and claws. He is Peter's father – though (for reasons too complex to go into right now) he and Benny were never 'together'.

Hass is the new gardener on the Collection, replacing Mr Crofton (killed in the war). A Martian, Hass can be seen lumbering around in his cold-suit, though he keeps himself to himself, doesn't say a lot, and doesn't seem at all happy to be here.

We hope your time on the Collection is useful. Enjoy your stay.

Misplaced Spring

By Paul Cornell

April 2604

Spring on the Braxiatel Collection.

The season was made by cheating, as it always had been. Ms Jones knew this very well. The cool, new-minted air with all the tastes of the trees was entirely the product of her employer's advanced science. The sunshine that dappled through the new growth and the doves that fluttered and called in it were equally filtered, edited, made right for the intelligent species that lived here. The first swallows that were swooping and diving over the lake had not returned from anywhere.

No, an asteroid the size of the one that housed the Collection couldn't possibly embrace spring on its own. And, she thought, a person the size of Clarissa Jones probably wasn't really up to it either.

She was standing beside Braxiatel at the bottom of a long ramp which led to a spacecraft landing gantry. He had a fixed smile on his face, seemingly determined to go through with this insane plan of his. Not that she'd ever express such thoughts to the man to whom she owed so much.

'Ms Jones,' he said suddenly. 'You agree with Professor Summerfield, I take it? You think I'm doing the wrong thing.'

'I would never –'

'Your foot is tapping.'

It was. She stopped it, and looked at him. He wore a scar on his wrist these days, where the Fifth Axis torturers – including the recent love of her life – who'd occupied his Collection had let some blood. Braxiatel could have had the scar removed. Ms Jones supposed that he wanted it there to show people, to force his point. He tended to find ways to use things to his advantage.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I was simply exercising my toes.'

'Interesting,' he murmured. 'With anyone else, I'd say there was the possibility of envy, that you didn't like me appointing Miss Tarrant as my new PA. With anyone else, I would worry that being promoted to Executive Secretary had not satisfied them.'

'With anyone else, you might have been somewhere even slightly near the mark with that thought.'

He smiled at her. 'I thought you'd gone back to being exactly who you were before the Occupation. My perfect stony guardian of office order. Which is a character you play, Clarissa, you and I know that.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'They say wartime reveals all sorts of things about a person.'

'And perhaps once revealed it's hard to get them back into the box,' he purred. 'Hence the tapping.'

They looked up at the sound of engines, and no more speech was possible for a good few minutes as the bulk of an interstellar passenger liner descended onto the gantry above.

'Welcome packs?' asked Braxiatel as the sound died away and the great doors of the craft started to heave open. The porters will give one to every fresher as they pass down the ramp.'

'Did you make sure that the packs contained that note about the ancient traditions of the Collection?'

'I made sure. Not that I was aware of any such traditions before I read the note.'

Braxiatel sighed. 'One can always pop back in time and actually walk a duck around the Small Trianon once every ten years if one feels the need.'

The ramp was suddenly full of youthful beings of all species, walking down onto what was going to be their home for the first ever term of the Braxiatel Collection's new role: as a centre of teaching as well as learning. The porters whizzed around their heads, using their manipulator fields to stuff a welcome pack into every available hand or pocket.

Braxiatel smiled up at them. 'Welcome!' he called. 'Welcome to the University of Braxiatel!'

Ms Jones looked down at a sudden noise, and found that, quite by itself, her foot had started to tap once more.

'The unexamined life is not worth living,' said Parasiel as he stalked towards the halls of residence. He was continuing an hours-old argument. There was a map somewhere in the pack one of the flying ball robots had given him, but he couldn't be bothered to open it up; he'd find the way himself. He wore a long black coat, a waistcoat, a threadbare multicoloured scarf and question marks on his lapels, like a lot of the colonial kids did. But they meant something individual and different for him.

'Bollocks,' said Meredith, walking beside him. They'd shared a double seat all the way from a colony world called Sothar. She'd been insulting his book-learning from about five minutes after having met him. 'Who are we to say who's examining what inside their heads? And to add to that the business of judgement, of actually saying that person's life is worthless, therefore... That sounds like Axis cant to me.'

'You reach for that so quickly. You know how much I hate what the

Fifth Axis stood for. Everyone does now. Even my parents, and they were voting to get Sothar to join the Axis back when they held all that territory. The Fifth Axis are just a fashion statement that's been and gone.'

'Parasiel!' She looked around, shocked, to see if anyone had heard them.

'So? I said it! I'll say it again. I'll yell it! Nobody can stop me saying what I want.'

'There are people here who were... tortured.'

'Aren't there always?' He slammed open the doors of the halls of residence with both arms. 'Never mind the past. Here we are, to make history of our own.'

The Pile stood by the shore of the lake. Adrian had started it off, putting stone on stone, not thinking about it, just luxuriating in the instinctive feel of weighing each stone and stacking it exactly right against the others.

His heart had leapt when Peter had joined in. The boy could speak a little, knew the words for his mother and father, and a kind of pointing word that made Adrian smile. And he had to support himself against the Pile as they made it.

But there. The sun was high over the trees, and a cool breeze was coming off the lake, and light was filling every gap in everything, and Adrian's son had done what Killoran children always did, what for a long time under the Occupation Adrian had worried he would never do, celebrating his culture in an instinctive task that was there for them before thought was.

The Pile was complete now. A little wonky. Adrian forced himself not to adjust the very top, which had been just out of Peter's reach. 'There,' he said.

'Go on then, up you go.' He mimed leaping in the air. 'Pile and climb. You can do it.'

He didn't know if the boy could. This might take another few months.

He saw Peter blinking, uncertain.

A terrible disappointment rose in Adrian, unasked for. It felt as if everything had died again, as if the Axis had stamped on this fragile thing.

He made himself not show it.

He made himself smile and very, very gently reached down to pick Peter up.

Peter leapt into his arms, one furry foot on the top of the pile to get there.

'Ah,' said Adrian, thinking of nothing now but the proud feeling of

his son against his skin. 'There you are.'

'How did we end up here?' said Benny. 'Again?'

'Because,' said Jason, 'you were reaching for a high shelf. And those trousers,' he nodded across the room at where they lay, 'oddly for you, are rather finely tailored.'

'I wasn't reaching for anything yesterday in the kitchen. Or... Goddess, that was yesterday too, wasn't it, in the hall -'

'You were wearing a long skirt in a narrow space.'

'Between the hours of ten and six. Or actually, these days, there's no time of day I'm safe from you. I keep finding socks of yours, all over my rooms. I'd put them in the washer, only that would mean I was doing your laundry.'

'It's because it's spring.'

'And the sap is rising?'

'I always used to love spring back on Earth. I could get horny about a ploughed field or a full moon. You just get the feeling that all of nature is... shagging.'

'For a moment there I thought you were going to say something profound.'

'For a moment there I thought I had.'

'This has to stop. We've been together, on and off, all this time, and here we are going at it like teenagers.'

He didn't say anything, tried to hide what might have been a hurt look.

She was too tired to pursue that. Braxiatel had asked her to stay on in an academic capacity for a whole year and, in the euphoria of the Liberation, she'd agreed. She thought it would be all giving out blankets and distributing food. Braxiatel got that over with in under a week, and within two she was filing. He wanted her experience by his side, to help with the new students.

Only Benny had found that she didn't really want there to be new students.

That the new grass on the fields which had been filled with craters looked too new.

She wanted to be away, she'd realised, quite quickly. And then come back.

Maybe. She'd asked Braxiatel to release her from her contract. But he wouldn't do that. So she had argued.

She had argued with Braxiatel while the Collection had gained University status, while the new buildings were going up, that it was all too much, too soon. That visiting students would be fine, maybe, in the end, lots of them, okay? But to have people actually Hiring here who hadn't been through the Occupation...

But no. He was on a mission. She was tired of arguing.

She tapped her finger against Jason, like she was asking if there was anyone home. 'You blame my trousers, chosen entirely for their baggy pockets, incidentally, but I put it to you that the real culprit lies here.'

'Benny, is the concept of blame, like you're putting together here, really an appropriate response to lots of good sex?'

She smiled, and patted him, then covered him up with the sheet. 'No, you're right, it isn't.'

He was silent for a while again. 'It's odd you do that now.'

She wondered where this was going. 'Decades of practice.'

'It's odd that you don't always come back with a sarcastic comment. It's like you're afraid I'll take your abuse seriously. After all this time!'

Bernice tried to think about that for a moment, but couldn't. Jason was now also a part of the furniture of this world that she'd been confined to. A part she didn't want to get frustrated with.

Not that frustration was her problem at the moment.

She closed her eyes and rolled over so she could fall asleep across his chest.

'I've got a student induction class in two hours. Not that I want to meet them. Wake me up.'

* * * *

Jason watched that extremely familiar head lying on him. It was true, in the last few weeks they'd been having more sex than at any other time in their lives. Well, with each other anyway. And for Benny the record wouldn't have taken a lot of breaking. But in his case...

No. He didn't want to think about the old days now.

Chiefly because he had no libido left to enjoy women and men who existed only as memories. Bernice had drained him of everything but herself. Her smell on his hands when he washed his face. Longer hairs taken from his hair in the shower.

It had started in the joy of the Liberation, when everyone had been celebrating. They'd been at a table at Cafe Vosta, and there'd been a nice bottle of wine, and he'd just stood up, took her hand, knew from her expression that she understood exactly where they were going and ran to bed with her.

He'd felt awkward in the morning, half thinking he should leave before she woke. But she had woken, and utterly unlike her usual morning self had reached for him, found him, taken him in her hand and wanted him again.

She was so defenceless that morning, real, a glimpse inside what he'd always known was in her heart but saw so little of.

So he'd kept meeting with her, eating with her, grabbing her. He had little to do, certainly nothing involving this mad University idea,

just some sort of consultancy job with Braxiatel that supposedly involved rebuilding, but actually would probably come down to archaeologically nicking anything Bernice wouldn't. And he'd done some writing.

He was aware of her frustration at being kept here. They'd talked about it.

God, they actually talked about things now. He hadn't noticed when that had started.

A couple of times, to his surprise, she'd even grabbed him. There were some things they still didn't do, that they hadn't done since they'd got back together. She liked to satisfy him, in all sorts of ways. But she'd only let herself enjoy that in the heat of the moment, if he got an angle right. It was like she'd only let herself get carried away if she was already in the middle of it all. She wouldn't let him do very much to deliberately get her there, had actually taken his fingers from her, had stopped him.

That was all different to how she'd been in the past. She used to insist on it, even, to the point where he'd worn his tongue out and spent a rather acute dinner party talking like he'd just had dental work.

These days she didn't tell him she loved him.

And so he couldn't say that to her either.

So where was this all going? In the context of their vastly complicated courtship stroke warfare, what did it all mean?

He stroked her hair from her ear, decided to speak to her about it. 'It's weird too, you teaching again. And that there are going to be kids here. And that you and me... we're... and you're snoring again. Great.'

Jason let his head fall back against the pillow and let himself start to dream afternoon dreams. Because it *was* great.

And yet. And yet...

'I love you,' he said.

But she really was asleep.

And soon so was he.

One hour fifty-five minutes later, Bernice leapt out of bed swearing, grabbed all the clothes she could, realised she didn't have time to shower and nearly kicked Joseph, the hovering porter, across the room as she hopped about, pulling on her underwear and well-tailored trousers.

'I did exactly as you asked, Professor,' the sphere hummed. 'I woke you at the appointed time.'

'And what happened to the usual routine of also waking me a couple of times before that?'

'I noted that you were... busy... earlier, and found other duties to

perform. Away from your rooms.'

Benny began a lengthy verbal dissection of Joseph's suddenly acquired sense of propriety which turned into a snort, grabbed her bag and ran for the door.

This was the feeling she'd been dreading, she realised, as she headed for the lecture hall. She felt awkward about just waltzing into a room full of students and telling them what to do. Telling people what to do, in general, still seemed a sensitive thing.

Everything so odd these days, everything at an angle. And herself... not right yet. No. Later for that.

Why was she worried about stuff as... cerebral as this? Just recently she'd been being shot at by... No. Her only worry right now ought to be cystitis.

She stopped at the door and listened. All those young voices. All that noise.

How dare she impose herself on that?

Actually... not the hardest thing she'd ever done.

She walked in, and didn't look at them until the noise had died down. Then she smiled at them, pretended she was glad to see them. 'Welcome to the Braxiatel Collection. I'm going to spend the next hour talking to you about where everything is, how to work out your timetable, and beer.'

A small cheer there. Some sympathetic laughter.

One student already had his hand up, and he was dressed as... oh.

'Yes?' she said, wrong-footed.

'Parasiel,' he said.

'Bless you.'

He frowned. 'I didn't think the renowned Professor Summerfield would lower herself to making jokes about people's cultural origins, particularly in religious terms, but we'll let that pass.'

'Ah. Well. Now. You see -'

'This pack the robot slaves gave us. It indicates a number of... actually, there's twenty-two... traditions we're supposed to follow. But how can a new establishment have traditions?'

'Because we made them up. And the Porters aren't slaves -'

'But if you made them up, they're not traditions. They're lies.'

Benny noted, to her surprise, that a number of students were nodding along with him. And a larger number were looking bored and uncommitted. There was a distinct lack of anyone shouting that this Parasiel was being ridiculous and that Professor Summerfield was right and obviously very wise. 'You're under no obligation to follow them.'

'Wouldn't you say the attempted imposition of false cultural norms

was the sort of thing the Fifth Axis did?’

Bernice took a deep breath, aware of the students looking at her, and wondered why she was here. Apart from the piece of paper that Braxiatel insisted she’d signed one night in the bar. ‘Yes.’

‘So what’s the difference between you and them?’

‘They had people killed and tortured. On one day of the year we wear funny hats.’

‘That’s not an essential difference, Professor, just a matter of style.’

Benny suddenly had a mental image of pushing him down a well.

‘Discuss,’ she said. ‘Okay, let’s start with those timetables...’

Parasiel raised his hand again.

She ignored it.

That night was the first Formal Hall, dinner served for all of the students and academics.

Some sort of bladder was being passed to the left, all along High Table, and the staff found themselves trying to swing it at the correct angle so they could drink from it without soaking their clothes.

‘This,’ said Braxiatel, ‘is a custom that dates back exactly a hundred years.’

It may need some fine tuning,’ he added, as Hass, the new gardener, missed his mouth entirely and just about filled his neck ring with wine.

Bev Tarrant found herself staring out at the mass of students who occupied the other long tables in the new dining hall. She’d been pleased to find that High Table not only included every academic Head of Department, but also the majority of her friends from the Occupation. Hass was there as a kind of substitute Crofton, as if Mr Crofton had earned the post for his successors.

What was she doing here? Obeying Brax, who’d asked her to remain as his PA. She’d done a few odd jobs for him, but nothing meaningful. Nothing-dangerous.

Bev had been growing her hair and fingernails since Liberation Day, and was reminded of that every time she had to push back her now slightly mad fringe, every time she picked up a glass. It didn’t look obsessive yet, but probably was. People called it feminine. But it was to hide the scars. Often, lately, she had found herself full of an inexplicable anger, and she felt it again now, looking at all these kids who hadn’t been here.

She should be moving on.

But then she’d be with even more strangers.

She didn’t want to look at even those friends around her for fear she’d snap at them.

Ms Jones, opposite, called to her, and Bev was relieved to find her

eyes making serious contact with someone else who... understood. 'So, Miss Tarrant. How was your day?'

Bev stared at her for a moment, then managed a smile. 'So insignificant that I don't remember.'

Bernice caught the look on Jason's face out of the corner of her eye.

Something inside her laughed out loud and said yes. Goddess, yes, to get her away from this hall of strangers, if nothing else. I don't want to get squiffy and start yet another row with Brax.

But she turned and rolled her eyes at him in a theatrical sigh, and looked out across the students once again. Why she did that as an immediate reaction, she didn't know. It was something new that seemed to have been placed inside her during the Occupation. A change.

She'd once picked up a book as she was lying on her front with Jason behind her, and despite passionately enjoying the strength of him, the feel of him, had pretended to begin to read.

She found she was looking straight at Parasiel. He was smiling at her. Must have been sat like that, waiting until her eyes found his.

Beside him sat a young female student, who when she saw which way he was looking, sighed and rolled her eyes also. That would be... Meredith, right.

Bright and unassuming. She seemed to have some sympathy for those trapped in this vast, awkward party of Brax's. Unlike the emotional fascist beside her.

Bernice held the eye contact for a moment, troubled. Then Jason was at her shoulder.

'Benny -' he began.

'No,' she said gently, taking the hand he'd put on her shoulder. 'Not tonight.'

So, for Jason, it was the cold beer at Cafe Vosta that went down well that night.

He got his favourite table, at the rail, looking out across the lake. He watched a scattering of fish on the surface, and felt the wind on his face and felt loved and lonely at the same time.

He looked up to see Ms Jones looking tearfully down at him.

He stood up to help her sit down. 'What is it, what's wrong?'

'The owner, Florth. He was putting a sign up saying "no students". I told him that was against Mr Braxiatel's code of practice, and he called me...'

'It's okay,' Jason took her hands to steady her.

She shook her head, forcing herself into precision. 'Because I was trying to enforce a rule that's designed... designed to uphold people's freedom. He called me a "filthy collaborator!"'

‘He what?’ Jason started to get to his feet. ‘You stay right there. I know a few Killorans who aren’t keen on signs that say who can go where.’

Ms Jones hauled him back into his seat. ‘You will do no such thing. I will place a complaint in Mr Braxiatel’s in-tray.’

He stared at her for a moment, finding that she was suddenly the target of the male rage that had risen inside him. Then he let out a long breath. ‘Yeah. Sorry, that was –’

‘No, I appreciate the sentiment.’

He slumped. ‘Still fighting.’

‘And increasingly, everything is inside everything else, and we find ourselves fighting ourselves.’ Ms Jones suddenly grabbed Jason’s drink and took a long and rather giddy gulp. ‘Not good, let me tell you. Been there, done that.’

Jason laughed, disarmed. ‘It’s good to see you, Clarissa. Listen, can I ask you... a personal question?’

‘I am... erm... flattered, however –’

‘No!’ Jason cried out. Then he coughed to turn that into a much quieter –

‘No, nothing like that. I wanted to ask: did you and... Moskof... Bernard... Did you tell him you loved him? A lot?’

‘All the time. And meant it. Do you have a problem with that?’

‘No. I was a filthy collaborator too, remember? At the same time as being a hero of the armed struggle. I was just thinking that, during the Occupation...’

‘We loved harder as well. Because it’s easy to love simple things.’

Jason allowed himself a smile. ‘I hope Benny feels that way too.’ He turned towards where Florth was regarding him uneasily from behind the bar, and called, with all the politeness he could muster: ‘Landlord! A drink for the lady!’

Bernice had been given a new academic office inside one of the staff buildings, and had decided that if she had to have tutorials, she’d rather do it from here than from her rooms. She’d been lecturing for a week now, had set her first assignments, and had found that part of it was... okay.

She hadn’t seen Jason so much that week.

Which was also... okay.

She’d filled the office with things as a matter of course, suddenly having extra space. The desk got lost under it all, and she was left with basically a couple of chairs and a kettle, surrounded by academic chaos. Which felt right for tutorials. And most of her students seemed to like it.

But before her first tutorial with Parasiel, she’d found herself hiding

things, as if the room made her vulnerable: what would he make of the poster of Laxmus, the pile of books on Redemptive Archaeology, the photo of Little Caldwell? She didn't want him to make anything of anything.

'Goddess, no!' Finally she chided herself and made herself sit down. 'I am a grown-up. I am entitled to this. Me being here has roots in time.'

He walked in exactly when he was supposed to, without knocking, and plonked himself down on the other chair, facing her. 'Benny,' he said.

She couldn't object to him using her given name. She'd told other students to do just that. 'How are you settling in?'

'How am I -? Oh!' He laughed. 'Settled! Of course I am! It's wonderful of you to be concerned.'

'Let's talk through your assignment.' She pulled the folder from on top of the pile of stuff. 'I thought this was mostly good, steady work, a solid summary of the Alpha Centaurian digs on Proxima. But then there's this bit...'

She flapped the last page at him. 'Is this... literary criticism? Poetry?'

'Perhaps a bit of both.'

She crumpled it up and threw it not at him but past his shoulder into the pile atop the wastebasket. Of course, it bounced off. 'That would lose you most of your marks in the exam. Take it to the creative writing course.'

He smiled at her. It was as if he'd expected that. 'Did you read it?'

'Until I hit the first iamb.'

'It was about the imperial futility of the Centaurians trying to understand a culture that they had destroyed millennia before, their attempt to conquer the past, to define themselves by that past. I hate that.' He formed his fingers into a spire. 'We're defined, you know, by what we hate just as much as by what we love. And only by those things. You wouldn't believe the power that gives one. Would you like me to talk to you about power? It's something I've made a study of.'

Bernice made herself look into his eyes and handed him the folder. 'Six out of ten. Must do better.'

'Well,' he smiled again, laughing. 'I'll do my best!'

She started to run in the afternoons, enjoying the heat. She'd bring Peter along, when he wasn't with his father, and leave him with his pile of stones beside the lake, while she ran round it, able to see him at every moment. He kept well away from the water, showing no interest in it.

Adrian had been so proud of that pile, had explained all the cultural

details of it to her. This was what Killoran children at this age were supposed to be doing.

Her son's happiness made Benny feel good, laid a foundation to that. But there was nothing built on it.

She saw Jason sometimes, found her thoughts going back to him, wanting him, saw a look on his face about wanting her to want him. So they did that.

It was like something was just uncompleted. A relationship that was like a dream. While they were both still here. Like two animals in a cage. Or maybe one animal and her emotional food source.

She was sure they should talk about something important, not just all the little things they were always chattering about now, she just didn't know about what. She couldn't find it in all her thoughts. But it felt like there was something big he wasn't saying.

That afternoon, she looked up and checked in, unconsciously, with Peter on the other side of the lake.

And saw a dark figure standing alongside him.

'Hey!' She started to run faster. 'Hey!'

As she neared them, the dark figure didn't look around. Parasiel had his hand on top of the pile of bricks, and Peter was looking uneasily between him and his mother.

Bernice didn't think.

She tackled Parasiel around his waist and brought him to the ground.

She grabbed the nearest thing she could find, one of the bricks, hard in her hand, and swung it above her head.

'Stop!' the boy shrieked. 'Please!'

She looked down at him. He was panting up at her, a terrified child.

'I was just playing with him, Professor. Playing, that's all!'

'No,' Bernice shook her head urgently. 'No, what is it about you?! Why do you look at me like that?!'

Parasiel swallowed. 'Well... because I note that there's... probably just from my side... I...' He made an obvious effort to compose himself. 'I was wondering if you'd like to join me for dinner? As a date, I mean.'

Benny dropped the brick, and stood up off him and gathered the now crying Peter to her. 'Oh,' she said to Parasiel. 'Oh, I am so, so sorry...'

Braxiatel looked up from his desk as Benny entered, having failed to knock as usual. 'Enter.'

'All right, so these students, these strangers amongst us. They're here for a reason, aren't they?'

He dropped a file into his out-tray. 'To let something inside us relax.'

To let everyone get past the pain. In the most natural way. Even if it has to be done by unnatural means. I wonder if we can train up a new bar owner from amongst them? Because I'm about to have the pleasure of sacking the old one. It turns out he's also responsible for writing some unfortunate things on the door of Ms Jones's accommodation.'

She sat down, noting that, but not willing to be diverted. 'I've heard some people saying that, with all these kids about, they miss the Occupation.'

'Well, people have nostalgia for the most terrible things, don't they?' He was busying himself, not looking at her. 'Nostalgia about war. Because it gives one access to the true nature of people. Access like a wound gives access to the body. Some of you must even assume you saw the real me in those days. Hah! But yes, students. I'm just starting to recall this about them: that they're often better in the concept than in the execution.'

Bernice raised an eyebrow. 'You heard about this afternoon?'

'No.'

'Still, that's rather an unfortunate turn of phrase in this place.'

'Not for much longer, I should think.'

'Hence all the mad "traditions". To give them something artificial to rebel against. To give them an urge to forget and make new traditions of their own.'

Braxiatel made eye contact with her, and let out a rare smile. 'For Ms Jones's sake, and all of us. To allow us to remember and forget, in balance.' He turned to the window and watched a group of students practising some terrible lumbering artistic dance in the distance. 'I think that must have been what I wanted.'

She found Jason that evening, and looked at him sitting at his table in the cafe, until he noticed, got up, came outside, and joined her.

She took his hands and smiled at him. He held on hard and smiled back.

And then suddenly, she ran.

And with confidence, he ran after her.

He followed her deep into the forest by the lake.

He bent to pick up her skirt from a shrub as he rounded a corner.

And looked up to see her holding awkwardly onto the low branch of a tree, reclined against its bark, with the smile on her face of someone who knows they're lovely and ridiculous at the same time. 'While you're down there...' she said.

And she let her head fall back to have no thought in it but allowing herself pleasure.

A while later, just before that pleasure came, she started to tell him she loved him, over and over again.

And with no fear, he said it back.

And the pleasure came. And she started laughing and put her hand on his hair and held him to her belly and fell onto the ground to hold him, feeling free of something which she hadn't quite realised had confined her.

Which is when they heard the sounds.

The same sounds they'd been making. From the undergrowth nearby.

Jason pushed back the leaves.

There lay Parasiel and Meredith, as surprised, and as naked, as they were.

Parasiel tried quickly to retrieve his dignity, which was wonderfully impossible.

'Professor, we're so sorry!' cried Meredith, covering herself. 'We were just... just..'

Bernice made happy eye contact with her, uncaring about anything for just this moment, and said –

'Forget it.'

Welcome to the Machine

By Sin Deniz

[Morning gorgeous]

Jess shifted in her seat, checking no one was near enough to read the message over her shoulder. She looked at the screen again, allowing herself a satisfied smile. 'Gorgeous'. That was a new one. Nobody she knew would dare call her that.

[Good morning]

[How's that pretty little head of yours today?]

[It's] she paused, looking round quickly again to see who was watching. The library was full of people but none taking notice of her. She sat back and continued *[okay]*.

Jess had told (him) yesterday that she was going out last night, so of course (he) had surmised she would be a little worse for wear. (He) was observant like that. Indeed, half of the attraction was his incisive analysis of everything she told him.

[Did you have a good time?]

Jess bit her lip. Imagine he had been at the party... What if he was watching her now?

[I think so]

[Good, you need to get out more and socialise; you work too hard]

[I love my job]

[Work isn't everything]

[I know, but I have to get on now]

[We can chat later?]

[Maybe]

[You take care, Gemini]

The message screen blinked out. Jess adjusted her position again and prepared herself for the day's work.

Jess Carter had been on the Collection three weeks now. She had settled into the place quite comfortably, considering she didn't really fit in anywhere. She had convinced herself she was coming to research her paper, 'Identity under conflict' – focusing on the Collection during the Occupation. But the more her colleagues had questioned her about the move, the more apparent the real reason had become. The Collection didn't have a reputation for academia, it was renowned for quite other reasons. It was a place of salacious goings on, a magnet for strange events. But, more importantly, it was a home for people who didn't fit anywhere else, for misfits and outsiders.

Even Jess could see the irony of someone so fascinated by psychology and sociology being so socially inept herself. It was as if she missed some kind of social codes or ciphers, like there was a language everyone else spoke which she'd never picked up. She knew what people had said about her, before her move to the Collection. It was as though she had decided to search the human psyche and conditions of behaviour to find out what was wrong with herself, in the same way some people suffering from a potentially fatal disease study its effects and patterns in an attempt to defeat it. And, though she'd never admit it to anyone, Jess didn't disagree.

She lived for her work. Maybe it was what psychiatry called a 'coping strategy' – behaviour or belief a patient invents to survive. But Jess had always been a top-grade student, and as she became continually aware of her lack of sociability, she focused her attentions more and more on becoming a harder worker, better student and ultimately a highly respected researcher. She was invited to lecture at conferences all round the cosmos, but she usually declined or had someone in her department deliver the lectures for her. Over time, Jess had begun to shun society more and more. In turn, it had made her more uncomfortable around people. Psychiatry called that a cycle of abuse.

The solution was to break that cycle.

So she had moved. The Collection had sounded different, a place she could call home. True, she'd not really made any proper friends yet, but she knew people's names and they'd smile at her when she said hello. There were still the closed-up groups, the established communities you found anywhere, but once Jess had got settled a bit more she felt certain people would involve her in their lives. And there was Mann, of course, always on her side and eager to encourage and help.

Mann was starting to affect her work dramatically, to the point where she would find herself daydreaming in the middle of reading a text, then having to go back and re-read up to ten pages. (He) had only been writing for a week, but already she felt him taking over her life.

She couldn't be sure that Mann was actually a 'he' – all she really had of him were words on a screen. But in reading the messages it was hard to think it could be otherwise. She hated to admit how much she liked hearing from him, as he was distracting her from work. So she tried to keep messages down to a minimum, limit her replies, only give a little of herself away. And that just seemed to encourage him. Speaking to Mann, every day and about anything... it was like Jess had found herself a boyfriend. One she had so much in common with – one too shy to approach her in person.

‘Good book, is it?’

Jess looked up quickly, aware she’d been staring out of the window while she thought. Raymond, the library’s burly maintenance technician was gazing down at her, grinning. Jess struggled to say something, embarrassed to be caught daydreaming. Raymond just winked, and got on with whatever chores he was doing. Mr Braxiatel had all kinds of archaic technology and lighting in the library, and though it lent it a certain atmosphere, things were always breaking down.

Jess looked back down at her book. She read about half a sentence, then looked up again at Raymond, now chatting amiably to some other researchers. He had an eye for the ladies, Jess knew, but he always included her in his attentions.

What if he was Mann, thought Jess. That would work. Raymond was conveniently never to be seen whenever she heard from Mann. Raymond was nice and polite, always greeted Jess when he saw her and occasionally seemed to focus his gaze on her a little too long for mere salutation. Mann wasn’t an academic, either – they rarely discussed anything intellectual. That would fit with Raymond, too. The physical attraction she felt when he was around was undeniable. Was that enough? She couldn’t see herself going out with him on a date. They could never have gone to a party like the one last night. Not together. Everyone would have looked at them. It had been bad enough as it was.

Jess had been reluctant to go along anyway, even on her own. Mann had insisted she go. She had no real friends, he said. Avoiding opportunities for social contact out of fear of being embarrassed or ridiculed was just making matters worse. He knew she was shy, and told her to do her hair up and wear something special. He told her she’d wow them all. Not quite believing she was taking his advice, she found an evening dress that would be adequate.

As she rang the intercom, she realised her hands were sweating and quickly wiped them on her dress. There were a few people already at the party. One rule Jess did know was never to turn up precisely on time. The other guests were all wearing very casual dress. One of them, a green-scaled woman, complimented Jess on her outfit. Jess, not knowing what else to say, had explained how the fabric responded to light-waves. She had hardly begun when the woman had been called over by another friend. Jess stood where she was, watching the two women exchange remarks in hushed whispers, furtively glancing back at Jess as they did so. She waited for them to invite her over. When they didn’t, she headed into the kitchen for a drink.

Soon the flat began to fill and Jess found herself worrying about fire

hazards and safety regulations. She had to bite her lip and stop herself from going up to one of the hosts and asking them about it. As she slowly panicked in her corner, cradling her drink, a man came over. He was dressed casually, like the others, yet looked somehow out of place in this type of situation too.

‘The name’s Igo,’ and he smiled nervously, holding his hand out.

‘Jess,’ she replied and was careful not to break any fingers when she shook his hand. She’d had comments about her strong grip in the past.

‘I knew it was you. I could tell as soon as I saw you but I wanted to make sure!’

‘You know me?’ and the palpitations began.

‘Jess Carter, “Assumed consciousness in dialogue exchange”. I read your thesis at university. Some interesting ideas – really made me re-think the work I was doing.’

‘Oh,’ responded Jess, beaming ‘What do you do?’

‘I’m studying gestalt identities – how group dynamics affect the individual self.’

‘Interesting,’ Jess answered, because that’s what you’re meant to say. Then she realised it actually was. Igo began to explain his current studies, eager to hear her thoughts on how the methodology might be improved. Jess had much more experience of running simulations for group dynamics, but he seemed to know his way round most of the usual loopholes. They might become friends, thought Jess. It was just a shame that his physique and dress sense weren’t more to her liking.

‘So how long have you been on the Collection?’ he asked.

‘Nineteen days,’ said Jess. ‘Collection time, of course.’

‘I’ve been here a month,’ said Igo. ‘But I haven’t seen you around before today.’

‘There’s so much to read and take in here,’ said Jess.

‘We’re gloriously spoilt for resources,’ Igo agreed. ‘I spend all day reading with my baby.’

Jess took a sudden step back, and he must have seen the look on her face.

He put his hand out to hers, but she snatched it away from him.

‘What did I say?’ he said.

‘You have a child,’ replied Jess. ‘I did not realise.’

‘What? No, sorry, I meant my computer. We spend so long together I call her my baby. And running those simulations, it’s like she’s got a mind of her own. You know? Anyway, what’s wrong with children?’

Jess looked quickly around. Everyone else in the room seemed engaged in conversation and enjoying themselves. Why was it always like this? Igo was probably the only freak at the party but it was Jess he had recognised. It was Jess who he wanted to come over and talk to and it was ultimately Jess who would be the focus of his attentions

for the remainder of the night if she didn't find a way to get rid of him. They had spoken for just a few minutes, and he was already trying to make a move on her.

Then she spotted Adreas, who lived in her block. She excused herself from Igo and raced over towards him. He was talking to someone else, some forgettable little man, so Jess tapped him on the arm. His exo-skeleton made a hollow tokking sound, and she quickly pulled her hand away. Adreas looked down at her.

'Jess. I didn't see you there.'

'It's crowded here,' said Jess.

'Have you met Professor Blanc? He's here working on a paper about Earth Reptile religion. I'm sure you'd find it fascinating...'

'Not really,' said Jess. Adreas looked surprised, but then Jess remembered he was studying comparative religions, too. Professor Blanc was shifting uncomfortably. Jess waited for him to ask about her own work. He didn't.

Instead, he told Adreas he needed to get another drink. That had to be a lie –

Jess could see he was drinking from one of those flasks that used transmat-technology to always stay full. But Adreas fell for it, and before Jess could put him right, he had wished her goodnight and left her.

Jess watched him go, then saw Igo. He and the green-scaled woman from earlier were stood right up against each other, laughing. They didn't have to be so close, even in such a packed room. The woman must have fallen for his ploy about babies. Igo looked up, saw Jess, and smiled at her. Then he said something else to the green woman and they laughed again. He was making a point, getting back at her. She knew she had to leave, cursing herself for ever thinking of coming in the first place.

Someone followed her home. She could hear their footsteps behind the echoes of her own. But when she glanced back, the stalker was hidden in the shadows. She got home, looked out of the window to see if she could catch (him), and kept vigil for exactly half an hour, seeing nothing. Then she checked her messages (nothing new in) and curled up in her duvet, still wearing the dress.

A tap on her shoulder made her jump. Jess whirled round.

'I'm sorry to disturb you,' said the young student, not sounding sorry at all, 'but there are no terminals free and you look like you might have finished.' He had a strange half-smile, like he was toying with her.

'I was considering a point,' she told him, though he obviously didn't believe her. She gathered up her belongings and hurried out.

She sat by the window in her room, savouring her double espresso. She had got no work done yet today, she just couldn't keep the ideas in her head. The coffee should help settle her nerves.

Raymond had given a sly wink in her direction as she left the library. Could that be seen as intention, or merely a friendly greeting? And what about Thomas?

Thomas was the student who had taken her computer. She had looked him up on the Collection's database as soon as she got back to her room, found out his name. He was obviously younger than her, but that would mean he would respect her, wouldn't it?

A three-dimensional image of him looked out at her from her terminal. He wasn't special – of average height and build with short dark hair and goatee.

But he had an angular face and piercing eyes that seemed to look through less every time she glanced his way. Even just an image of him unsettled her. Was that attraction... or fear? What if he was Mann? Now she thought about it, just as Raymond was always out of sight when Jess conversed with Mann, Thomas was always on a terminal nearby – and never where she could see what he was typing. He was cocky, too – she could see it in his face – just like Mann was. It would fit.

Jess could imagine her and Thomas together in a way she couldn't with Raymond. Thomas was a student and would have some experience of her work, her name, even if it wasn't within her own field. Academics should be with academics. Though Mann never engaged in academic discourse, that didn't rule Thomas out. He was flirting with her.

As she dwelt on this she heard a noise from outside. A figure was moving from under the shade of a tree near her apartment and walking over to the path nearby. A man.

Something had disturbed him – he was moving quickly but trying to make it appear the most natural thing in the world.

Jess squinted; hampered by the failing light and her own questionable eyesight.

It took her a moment to realise who it was.

'Igo!' she gasped.

It couldn't be anybody else. The figure was his size, and had his walk and his manner. Where was he going? He had to be coming here!

Jess leaned a little further out of her window, straining to see. A couple of students looked up at her from the path. They were from her block. Jess hurried back inside to her coffee machine.

Unable to concentrate, and invaded by thoughts of Igo shinnying up the wall to accost her in the small hours, she decided to brave the

journey to the library before it closed. Do some more work, just to take her mind off it. The coast seemed clear as she stepped outside. What if Igo was waiting for her?

She looked carefully around. Maybe she was imagining things. She'd talk to Mann about it.

'It's Jess, isn't it?'

There were people all around them, but Jess was suddenly terrified.

'I got your name from the database,' he said.

'Hello Thomas,' she said, levelly.

'You know who I am?' he asked, surprised.

'I looked you up, too,' she said.

'I'm... flattered,' he said, like he was toying with her. 'I was hoping to bump into you, to apologise about this morning.'

'It's okay,' she said. 'You wanted the terminal.'

'You didn't look like you were working. Then I saw the programs you were running. That's really interesting stuff...'

Jess blushed, dropping her head a little in the hope that Thomas wouldn't notice.

'Would you tell me about it?'

'Cognition in response,' said Jess, 'is essentially subjective. And yet, objective nodes...'

Thomas laughed at her. 'You might need to go a bit slower, I'm only a pedestrian thinker. How about we do this over a drink?'

Jess stared at him, amazed by his confidence. Surely he must realise how much more senior she was to him. 'That's not appropriate,' she said.

'Come on, what's the worst that can happen?'

'You'll make me drunk and take advantage of my body.'

Again he laughed at her. 'That doesn't sound so terrible!' And there was something in the way he looked at her that made her consider it, just for an instant.

'Let me go!' she shouted, suddenly afraid. 'Leave me alone!'

'Hang about,' said Thomas, taken aback. He tried to put his hand on her. In a surprise moment of strength, Jess shoved Thomas back and he lost his footing, stumbling over some bushes. Jess took the opportunity and ran.

'Jess, wait!'

She didn't. His footsteps were soon fast behind her.

'You can't treat people like this!'

Jess ran as fast as she could, yet she knew the footsteps were gaining. She didn't know where to go, what to do. He was faster than her. As she turned the corner, Thomas caught up with her again.

'I only want to talk to you!' He kept his distance. 'Look, if I came on too strong...' Then he grabbed her, pulled her up close and kissed her.

‘Let me go!’ Jess wailed, backing up against the wall, her legs giving out under her.

Looking down on her, his voice almost turned into a snarl as his mouth formed the words.

‘What’s wrong with you?’

As Jess wondered what he was capable of, he disappeared from view. Did she dare to look? Was he planning something?

It was only when she looked around that she saw the builder, Mr Wall, holding Thomas by his neck a few feet away.

‘You all right?’ asked Wall gruffly.

Jess got to her feet defiantly and dusted herself down. ‘I’m fine,’ she said.

‘Ms Carter, take your time. There’s no rush’

Jess glanced over at Thomas who had his head down – in shame or in anger; she couldn’t tell – and continued with her recollection of the past few days.

They had told her they just wanted the facts. What else did they think she would say?

She sat back down and glanced around the room, surprised there were so many people here. Other women had come forward to press charges against him. He seemed to have a thing for ‘vulnerable’ women, whatever their race.

He would flatter them a little, buy them a few drinks, then come on really strong. They had told Jess in no uncertain terms: she was not alone. But the others hadn’t stood up to him, had they?

‘Professor Bernice Summerfield,’ called out one of the clerks. The woman in question stood and explained her relationship to the defendant. Jess couldn’t believe that Professor Summerfield was Thomas’s supervisor, or that she had worked with him for six weeks without ever being aware of his problems. That she had not noticed him acting strangely, Summerfield put down to the fact that she was his tutor and this would make the situation fragile. But Jess thought there was no way a person like Thomas could harass a woman he himself was intimidated by. She was confident and intelligent and had such an air about her as she explained herself in court. Thomas’ lawyer asked her questions about the sexual life of the Collection’s students, about Summerfield’s own sex life. And Summerfield answered every question honestly, openly and with perfect seriousness. She was stunning. This woman wouldn’t be pushed around by anyone.

Mr Wall made his statement. He looked towards Jess whilst recounting the fracas with Thomas, and she could feel Summerfield looking her way too. She felt very uncomfortable in her seat. Jess

knew she didn't come up to the same standard. She was a victim. Did Summerfield even know what that was like?

The court hardly debated the decision. Thomas would be leaving the Collection that day, and would not be able to return. As the verdict was announced, Thomas stood, glaring at Jess. He only looked away when Wall growled at him. Then Thomas was led away, looking small and pathetic, and Jess never saw him again.

The hearing over, she made an attempt to leave, to get away without being asked more questions. Professor Summerfield cut her off just by the door.

'Hi Jess, I'm Benny,' she said, putting out her hand as if they were old friends. Jess took it meekly.

'Hello,' was all she could say.

An uncomfortable few moments passed. They were still holding hands. Jess didn't want to be the one to break off first. Eventually, she lifted her head, and looked Summerfield in the eye.

'Look,' said Summerfield. But she didn't say anything else. She didn't seem to know how. And then Jess realised she felt awkward about the whole thing.

'Don't worry, Professor Summerfield, you could not have known,' said Jess.

It had to be the right thing – Summerfield beamed at her.

'Benny,' she said, finally letting go of Jess's hand.

'Benny,' Jess repeated, carefully. It didn't feel right. 'As you said in your statement, Thomas never made advances to you.'

'He did, actually,' said Summerfield. 'I just thought he was harmless. Told him where to go.'

Jess nodded sadly. 'I should have done the same.'

'I'm not blaming you,' Summerfield insisted. 'You've got nothing to beat yourself up about.'

'But you would have handled the situation differently.'

'Listen,' said Summerfield. 'He was under my supervision, and it's my job to see that things like this don't happen. I let you down.'

'I don't think making sure your staff haven't any psychological problems is in your contract is it, Professor Summerfield?' and Jess suppressed a wry smile.

'Benny.'

'Sorry.'

'I still feel responsible. The Collection is supposed to be a place we can all enjoy. We've had enough of bullying.'

'Thank you,' said Jess.

'Maybe I can make it up to you over a beer sometime?'

'Yes,' said Jess. 'I must go – I have a lot of work to catch up on.' Jess let Summerfield shake her hand again, then got away from her as fast

as she could.

As she hurried back to the library, all she could think about was how she compared to Summerfield. Although a famous sociologist in her own right, Jess was living in the shadows. They were both academics, both had achieved much in their lives, and Jess easily had the better research and publishing record. Yet Summerfield was a happy, self-confident woman with a male companion. All Jess had were Mann's messages, and advances from freaks and stalkers. She wasn't even sure of that. As Thomas' trial had played out, she had started to have doubts. Had Thomas really been out to get her? Or had it been all in her mind? Had she just been projecting what she feared – or wanted – onto him?

Maybe that would tie in with her research.

She knew that she could never be a Bernice Summerfield, but she had hoped at one time to have a normal life, one where she could walk arm-in-arm with her partner and complement their relationship with flirty but work-related computer messages.

Jess knew it was time to decide about Mann. Should she end it with him and attempt to find companions in a more traditional way? Was she even capable of that? How could she find love if she put faith in her personality and social awareness? They turned people off, even here on the Collection, the one place she thought she would fit in.

Here was the crux that had opened her up to Mann. And answering to him was never going to fix the problem.

She took her usual seat in the corner, started her terminal and logged into her mail account. One new message. From Summerfield. Inviting her out with some other friends.

Jess wasn't ready to reply. She had to deal with Mann first.

She opened up her program, and ran through the series of tick-boxes that defined each session. She'd built the wizard herself, careful to allow for different statistical models depending which way her work went. It had been ready a week, ready to be tried on real subjects. All she had to do was put up a notice asking for volunteers. But she had kept the program to herself. Not any more.

Jess looked round. No sign of Raymond, as usual. Igo, however, the guy from the party, was on a computer at the far end of the room. He looked away quickly. What if he was...

No. Enough.

Jess switched back to her mail. There was a message from him. From Mann.

Of course there was.

Should she open this last message? Would it break her resolve?

She opened it, and despite herself she smiled. For a moment she

wanted to write back, explain what she was doing, why she'd used him. But he wasn't real, was he? That was the point.

[Morning gorgeous]

Final Draft

By Cameron Mason

The Braxiatel Collection welcomes all presenters and attendees to the First Annual Braxiatel Collection Archaeology Conference.

As soon as you arrive on the Braxiatel Collection please make sure you have your Plasti-disc security pass handy. If you have mislaid your security pass, report to Ms Jones at Administration immediately.

The security pass will allow you access to your quarters and the areas of the Collection where the Conference takes place.

Please take advantage of the tour of the Braxiatel Collection.

Students currently studying at the Collection will show you around the facilities the Collection has to offer. Tours begin at 5.15 pm on all days of the Conference and start from outside The Caretaker's Cottage'.

Programme of Events

Thursday;

ALL DAY – presenters and attendees arrive.

Friday:

Time	Event	Presenter
9 am	Welcoming Address	Mr Irving Braxiatel
9.30	Keynote Address – Martian Funeral Rites	Professor Bernice Summerfield
10.30	Early Religious Iconography of Earth Reptiles	Professor A. S. Blanc

It was Friday morning, just after 7 am, and the Braxiatel Collection was all frenzied chaos. There was still a lot of preparation work being carried out, such as the setting up and fine-tuning of the audio-visual equipment, the arrangement of seating and general spot tasks. A group of Killorans were making last-minute improvements to the stage. The various camera teams were testing angles. Organisers were checking reservations on seats.

Bernice, nominally in charge of it all, could make out snatches of conversation among the hubbub:

‘... three hours left!’

‘Not my left, your left!’

‘...the Axis could organise one of these things...’

This was the reason Bernice had found a quiet corner. Pulling out her notes, she started to read over her keynote address. She had spent so long working on it, she wasn't even sure it made sense. But even now she was still going over it, looking for sections that could be rephrased, words that could be altered.

'Professor Summerfield?'

Looking up, she saw the familiar green figure of Hass striding towards her.

He carried a paper journal, probably the latest thing on bedding plants. Hass took his work seriously – too seriously. The Martians weren't known for being particularly chummy, but since he'd arrived on the Collection, Hass had only 'befriended' one person. Goddess alone knew why it had to be her, although it did have its advantages...

'You're up early this morning,' she said, cheerily.

'I am concerned,' he replied. His voice was breathy and rasping, but the cold-suit filtered out his lisp.

'What's wrong?' she said, suspecting already. 'Have guests been trampling over the garden beds?'

'Your paper. I only got to read it last night.'

Bernice grinned wearily. 'I know. I only finished writing it last night. What did you think?'

Hass hesitated before answering. 'It is well written,' he said, carefully.

Bernice's smile faltered. 'What's wrong with it?'

Again, Hass hesitated before replying. 'I do not mean to cast doubt on your academic credentials. But Rablev's Monument... is also his tomb.'

'But it was put up centuries after he died,' snapped Bernice, irritated he'd made such an elementary mistake.

Hass shook his head. 'It was rebuilt. After the war.' He handed her the journal. 'The 2598 survey by Omvakh concurred with that hypothesis.'

Bernice looked at the journal. Not one she recognised, she had to admit.

Probably because it was written in Vellophoi. She looked up at Hass again.

'How am I meant to –?'

'I have enclosed the translation.'

Bernice flipped quickly through the pages, and found the neatly folded papers slipped inside. The translation had been done by hand – she recognized Hass's careful script. He had translated them into Martian. Which, as an eminent professor of Martian culture, Bernice could read. More or less.

She traced a finger along the precisely drawn runes. She only had to get to the end of the second clause before the truth dawned on her.

‘Bollocks!’ she said, leaping to her feet. ‘Thank you for telling me, Hass. If Braxiatel or anyone else is looking for me, I’m indisposed.’ With that, she sprinted back towards her rooms as fast as she could.

A knock at the door disturbed Bernice. She swore, got up, sent papers flying all around her, swore again and answered. Adrian and Peter grinned at her.

Then they faltered – they must have seen her expression. Bernice quickly gathered up her son in her arms and hugged him. When she let him go, he ran past her legs, into the room.

‘We dropped by to wish you luck with the address,’ Adrian explained. ‘If it’s not a good time...’

‘Thank you Adrian,’ she said, determined to be civil. ‘I really need all the luck I can get now. Hass just let me know my paper is hilariously inaccurate, in a losing-job-and-reputation sort of way. So I’m rewriting the whole thing from scratch.’

‘Won’t that take time?’

‘I’m delivering the thing in two hours,’ she said, rather coldly.

‘Hey,’ he called out, over her shoulder. ‘Shall we leave your mum to work?’

‘No!’ said Peter, from where he stood by his mother’s desk. When Bernice looked over at him, he quickly looked away. A pang of fear went through her – she couldn’t keep dismissing him, just because she was busy. She needed to spend more time with her son; perhaps she could take the next weekend off and...

Then she realised he was hiding his face because he was guilty. He was failing to conceal the crayon in his hand. And on the desk...

‘No – not that paper!’ Benny cried, running forward. Peter stood his ground, that same defiant look that Adrian sometimes got. Bernice carefully removed the important pages from his reach, then found him something she didn’t mind him scribbling on. Something of Jason’s.

‘We could do drawing outside,’ suggested Adrian.

Peter looked at him carefully, not sure he wasn’t being conned.

‘And maybe stop at Vosta’s for a fruit drink,’ Adrian went on. That decided matters. Peter gave his mum a kiss goodbye, took Adrian’s hand and hurried out, dragging the Killoran behind him. Adrian had just enough time to wink at Bernice before he was gone.

Bernice went to the door to see them off. Only when she saw them turn the corner did she close the door. She made her way back to the desk, and stared down at the papers Peter had drawn on: Hass’s translation now had a mess of green crayon all over it. Oh well, she thought, she could say Peter had done a drawing of him. She got back

to work.

Another knock at the door disturbed Bernice. She looked up at the clock – just ninety minutes left and she hadn't got a quarter of the way through. Again, a curt, impatient knocking on the door. 'Typical,' Bernice muttered. 'The day I actually need Joseph, and he's off getting a service.'

Standing at the door were Braxiatel and Bev. Braxiatel had a concerned look on his face. That meant something particularly bad.

'Brax, Bev – what a pleasant surprise.' Benny was indeed surprised; she thought they would be busy overseeing the preparations. Braxiatel flicked a smile on and off.

'My dear Bernice, you shouldn't be hiding in your rooms like this,' he said, less pleasantly that she was used to. Bev, even from the doorstep, was looking around Bernice's rooms. What did she expect to see there – or who?

'You should be meeting and greeting our guests,' said Braxiatel, almost-sweetly. 'Is there anything wrong?'

'Everything is fine,' said Bernice, crossly. 'Just peachy. I'm merely spending a moment of quiet time before I go out there and wow them with a superb and completely accurate presentation.'

Braxiatel beamed at her. 'Excellent. Well, we won't keep you.' But he wasn't going anywhere.

'What?' asked Bernice.

'Only a little thing,' he said. 'I've scheduled a seminar based around your paper for this afternoon. There'll be time for people to ask questions that there wasn't time for in the morning, and for others to pick over your paper.'

He turned on his heel. 'Knew you wouldn't mind!'

Bev had a dangerous look about her, like she expected the day to turn nasty.

She still didn't trust anyone, wouldn't let down her guard. 'Jason not in here with you?' she asked.

'Oh course not,' snapped Bernice. 'I'm *working*.'

'Going well, is it? You don't want to mess this up, Benny.'

'Of course! You can trust me to uphold the fine traditions of the Braxiatel Collection!'

Benny smiled so hard it hurt her, then shut the door. She waited until Bev's footsteps had gone away, then wilted forward.

'Oh Goddess!' she said. 'I'm so buggered now...'

Jason walked along the hallway to Benny's rooms. He had a bunch of flowers in his hand, and a large grin on his face. When he got to Benny's door he noticed two things – Wolsey and Joseph. The cat was mewling at the cat-flap, trying to bat it open with his paws, while

Joseph hovered irritably at eye level.

Jason bent down to tickle Wolsey under the chin, and spoke to Joseph.

‘What have you done this time?’

Joseph replied, ‘I came back from my servicing to find the door locked and the cat-flap taped up. Professor Summerfield doesn’t want to be disturbed.’

Jason got up from the cat and pulled a key from his pocket. He pulled one of his more mischievous grins. ‘I’m sure she’ll want to see me,’ he said.

He unlocked the door and turned the handle, all without a hint of a noise.

He kept his thieving skills honed by practising at home. His neighbours might laugh, but it continued to pay off. Jason opened the door, easing it forward with care.

Wolsey pushed past his shins and raced through into Bernice’s rooms.

Jason was too slow to grab the cat. He looked up, just in time to get a large, heavy book right in the face. It threw him backwards into the corridor, where he smacked the back of his head on the far wall before he hit the floor.

Joseph twittered over him, quickly making sure he was okay. Jason batted him away.

‘Benny, what’s wrong?’ he said, trying to sound hurt.

‘Not *now*, Jason!’ Benny yelled at him, not even looking round from the desk.

Jason got unsteadily to his feet. ‘Well pardon me for coming round to wish you luck with these expensive flowers.’

No response. Bernice, head down, was scribbling fiercely.

‘I mean, why lock Wolsey and Joseph out?’

Bernice stopped scribbling. He thought for a moment he’d got through, then realised he’d just interrupted a train of thought. Not good.

‘I’ve got no time to explain,’ she said, dead calm. ‘Please go now.’

Well, at least she wasn’t shouting. He might still work this. ‘No,’ he said.

‘I came here to wish you good luck, and that’s what I’m going to do.’ His attempt to step into the room was met by another hefty text, thrown directly at his head.

‘You’re a frighteningly good shot,’ he said, collecting the book from the floor. ‘I sometimes forget you were in the army. How are you with smoke signals, building bridges, that kind of thing?’

‘*Go away!*’

‘Not until you talk to me!’

‘Just shut up Jason Kane and leave me alone!’

Jason waited a moment for her to apologise. She always apologised, he just had to give her a minute. She didn’t look round from her work. Jason felt his shoulders sag.

‘Okay,’ he said. She didn’t want a fight. Fine. Jason put the flowers down on one side, and left quietly. He didn’t close the door – which would make it easier for Bernice to hare after him, when she had come to her senses.

A few minutes later, Bernice saw him out the window, stalking sadly past, kicking his feet. She sighed. He must have run round the building to get there that quickly. She bobbed her head down – he mustn’t catch her looking. When she looked up again, he was gone.

‘Great,’ said Bernice, to no one in particular. ‘An hour left, and now I’ve just managed to kill my love life...’

She sat back and looked at her work. So. If Rablev’s Monument was built on the remains of... well, Rablev’s Monument... how had they got the materials back across the canyon? Especially with the Martian military camped there...

Benny froze. She looked at the chart again. What had Jason said?

Of course! If the military had built bridges during the war, then it would be easy to transport materials. But they’d be temporary bridges, they would have fallen down. She had it!

Which meant she had to cross out everything she had written in the past hour.

She had got together a draft and was reading it through as fast as possible, speaking it aloud in a manic gabble, deleting any words she stumbled over. It could only make it better. Just half an hour before she had to read the thing out in front of a few thousand scholars, all eager to savage her.

‘Bloody hell!’ she snapped at another knock at the door. There was a nervous whisper behind her. She looked round, to find the door still open where Jason hadn’t closed it. Two of her better students were standing there.

‘How are you Benny?’ Meredith beamed at Bernice.

‘All set for your big presentation, Professor S?’ Parasiel asked, a cheeky grin on his face.

Bernice smiled a false smile. She always tried to show a professional side to her students. Poor lambs, they scared so easily. ‘I’m all ready for it,’ she said, calmly. ‘Just relaxing until it’s time. Is there anything you want – any questions about the assignment, a few hints on the next unit of work?’

They weren’t convinced by this bravura performance. Meredith spoke up: ‘Well if you wouldn’t mind giving us a quick preview of

your paper...'

'Of course,' Bernice bluffed. 'Well it's on Martian funeral rites, generally. A lot of their rituals are the same as the Ancient Egyptians', because both civilisations were influenced by the Osirians...'

'Doesn't everyone know that?' asked Parasiel. 'I mean,' he said, realising how that had sounded, 'we did it at primary school...'

'Well yes,' said Bernice. 'That's true. It is the general consensus, isn't it?'

'Is something wrong, Professor S?' Parasiel asked, warily. Bernice realised she had that dopey look she got when ideas were forming.

'No, I've just thought of something,' she said, quickly, eager to press on with another new idea. 'If you two go now, you'll grab a good seat!'

The students glanced at each other.

'We'll take the hint,' said Meredith.

'You shouldn't leave your essays to the last minute,' said Parasiel, wagging a finger. 'Isn't that what you told me?'

Meredith grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away.

Bernice shut the door behind them, then ran back over to her desk. She scrolled up to the top of the document, selected the whole introduction, and ruthlessly deleted it.

Then she started again.

The paper had finally printed out – and as it had done so, she had added a few notes in pen. It would have to do, but she didn't think she'd be losing her job over it. She looked at the clock. She was due on in three minutes – not enough time to even get there.

Bernice grabbed a jacket that would make her look 'old school', stuffed her precious paper into a satchel, added Hass's journal and translation, and hurried to the door. She caught Jason, standing in the corridor, trying to find the courage to confront her again. She'd caught him off-guard, a look of concern and anger on his face.

'Jason, I really don't have time for this.'

'Benny,' he said. 'We need to talk. I need to know what I did wrong earlier.'

'Not now. After the conference.'

'Yes now – I saw you talking to your students a couple of minutes ago and I want some time now.'

'Bugger off. I have things to do.'

Jason refused to move. 'I don't want us to be like this any more. This is how we got divorced, arguing about nothing and you being too busy to clear the air. I mean –'

Bernice grabbed Jason and kissed him furiously. She pulled away, took in his startled expression, then went in for another, longer snog.

‘That’s for building bridges,’ she said. ‘But I really have to go.’

Jason was still too stunned to say a word. He had an infuriatingly tempting look of bliss about him. It would keep. She pushed him out of the way, and hurried off down the corridor.

Bev was at the ‘stage door’ waiting for her when Bernice arrived, breathless, from a run across campus.

‘How are we for time?’ she asked, all a-fluster.

‘You’re four minutes late, but Brax is stalling. That hilarious anecdote about where he gets his suits from again.’

‘Goddess, I’m that late am I?’ said Bernice, rifling through her satchel for the bits she needed. ‘I’d best get in there before they murder him.’

‘Got everything you need?’ asked Bev, wryly.

Bernice was trying to get the various pages in order. Then she stopped, and held one of the pages up close. The notes she had added as the thing had printed were now beginning to run. She looked up at Bev.

‘I can’t even read this...’ she said, quietly.

Bev shrugged. ‘Oh well,’ she said. ‘Make it up as you go along.’

Braxiatel had introduced her, then whispered ‘Break a leg’ as they had passed on the stairs. Not helpful.

Legs shaking, she walked up onto the stage, stopping behind the podium.

She looked out over the crowd. No assassins this time, she thought. What a pity.

She looked down at her notes. She couldn’t focus on them. She looked up again, and out over the crowd. She couldn’t take in all their faces – strangers, stern-faced academics, ready to pounce on any inaccuracy; friends – Jason, Adrian, Peter on his lap, Hass, Clarissa, Bev, her students – all willing her on.

No pressure then.

Bernice coughed to one side, then leaned into the microphone.

‘Hello there,’ she said. ‘And thanks to Brax for those kind words. Yes, I’m Bernice Summerfield and I’m going to start us off. I was going to speak about Martian funeral rites, which one of my students tells me we all know about anyway...’

She nodded towards Parasiel, who squirmed in his seat as others looked his way. They were warming to her, she could feel. But glancing down at her notes, she still couldn’t read anything. Just an hour more and she could have got it all in the autocue.

‘Now, I know Brax has been regaling you with his best tailoring stories,’ she went on, just to keep brazening it out. ‘And you’re in no mood for more jokes. But a funny thing happened to me on the way

here...'

She waited for the reaction and got it – a rolling groan erupted across the auditorium, the crowd playing up their boredom.

'No really,' Bernice said, warming to them, too. 'I'd written this exquisitely argued paper, a real crowd-pleaser. And then someone pointed out that I'd got it spectacularly wrong.'

She shrugged. No one laughed.

'And that's a good thing,' she said. 'You see, we've all had it wrong. Let me tell you about bridges...'

Braxiatel was supervising the setting up of a stall for *Archaeology* v-journal when Bev found him.

'You sat in on it?' he asked.

'Professor Blanc was as flawless as you said. A well-argued paper, I think.'

'I meant Benny,' he said, levelly. 'I should have been there.'

Bev took a deep breath.

'She lurched from straight-on lecturing to audience participation, which in turn led to a fight between two academics. Chaotic and all over the place. It was obvious she had thrown out whatever she had written and was just winging the whole thing.'

'I see,' said Braxiatel. He tapped his fingertips together in irritation.

'Perhaps I overestimated her.' He sighed. 'Well, maybe I can find her something else to do, away from all this.'

'I'm sorry?' said Bev.

'Well, she's clearly not cut out for the rigours of academic life. I was wrong about her.'

Braxiatel's eyes took on a misty and far-off look, the look someone might have when faced with putting down a beloved old dog. 'This lifestyle I've given her has caged her personality and now it's struggling to break out in any way it can. Perhaps I should send her away for a while, out on an expedition, back out in the field, where she belongs. There's an archaeological expedition to Mars being organised by an old friend of mine, maybe I can pull a few strings and get her involved in it. Yes, it would be ideal for her – and for me, if they happened to find some Osirian artefacts in the process...'

Bev took his hands in hers and brought him back to reality. 'Irving,' she said, 'you don't understand.'

'Oh?' he said, evidently expecting worse to come.

'Benny was brilliant.'

Braxiatel didn't even blink.

'Of course she was,' he said. 'I never expected anything less of her.'

Against Gardens

By Eddie Robson

Crofton

From under the ground I am a better gardener than ever. When I awoke there was much to be done. The landscape was ravaged and unfamiliar, disturbed by other hands; but it did not take long to put it right.

Hass

This is the same spot on which I was standing the day I arrived: the vantage point from which I realised that I wasn't going to like it here.

I arrived at the Braxiatel Collection a year ago. Circumstances dictated that my first visit to the Collection was on the day I moved here to take up the post of gardener. Braxiatel had insisted on a swift appointment, so the interview had not been conducted on-site but televisually. The distance of the transmission rendered the conversation a ponderous affair: several times he waited a few minutes before asking, 'Did you not hear that or are you just thinking?'

I was also sent an extensive collection of photographs depicting all areas of the grounds, although he stressed that these had been taken prior to what he described as an 'inconvenient incident' in which the previous gardener, Crofton, had been slaughtered and the garden itself had suffered damage. The damage didn't concern me. I found the established style far too... pretty? Is that what I mean? Pretty and open, opting to appeal on a first impression rather than rewarding the onlooker over time, and if I did take up the post then I had every intention of altering it substantially.

Braxiatel either failed to pick up on, or decided to ignore, my lack of enthusiasm for the job, stressing that I was his first and only choice and that the salary represented a 92 per cent rise on what I was earning on Phobos.

Tiring of the conversation and his genial pressure tactics, I asked for time to think it over.

'Certainly,' Braxiatel replied. 'How long? Half an hour, an hour?'

I asked for a few days.

Eventually my words reached Braxiatel and I observed him shift in

his chair.

Rich men are unaccustomed to taking 'No' for an answer and Braxiatel is not enamoured of 'Maybe' either, but this was not important to me. 'Of course,' he said. 'I've no shortage of other matters to attend to.'

When I turned off the communicator I was fairly sure that I would turn the offer down; I just wanted it to appear that I had given it fair consideration. But I allowed myself to be influenced by the opinions of others, which I now regard ruefully. Later the same evening I attended a charity dinner function at the invitation of the Vice-Governor (whom I had not voted for, but felt it prudent to remain on good terms with) and during the meal I mentioned that I had been offered a senior position at the Braxiatel Collection. I made the interjection only out of boredom, since the conversation had veered dramatically on to subjects about which I knew little and cared nothing. The piercing voices around the table (mostly belonging to excitable socialites – some Martian, some human – of the kind my mother likes to hear about) chattered even more harshly on my ears, leaving me looking back fondly on that period of boredom in the face of intense and rather presumptuous interest. Unsolicited advice was politely but forcefully offered. The word 'prestigious' was used a great deal and the prevailing opinion was that I would have to be insane to turn the offer down.

I am fairly confident that I am not insane. Although if it meant that people like those at that dinner would be less inclined to speak to me, I am not sure I would be entirely averse to the idea. But the next day Valentino, who was one of my colleagues at Aklaar's Park, exhibited much the same reaction, albeit in a less shrill tone. He reminded me that I often claimed to miss working in an academic environment and that I disliked dealing with the charged political atmosphere on Phobos, although my relationship to that was quite complex.

However, I was content living on Phobos. It was close to my family, with whom my relationship has only recently started to improve. We have a family tradition of working in politics, which my brother and sister have both followed. My decision to study for a degree, then a doctorate, in Botany had not been well received, particularly since I can say without conceit that I had always been the family favourite. For well over ten years I experienced only minimal contact with my parents. They did not attend any of my graduations.

This awkwardness came to a sudden end when my fungal lattice garden won a major landscaping award, two years ago – or is it three now? It was my third major commission, to create and maintain a public garden on Phobos as part of the regeneration programme. The society which presented the award has an overwhelmingly human

membership: I remain the only Martian ever to collect the prize and in fact the first non-human to win in quite some time.

Even so I did not place much merit upon my victory. It was a token gesture.

The panel had been accused in recent years of being blinkered, conservative, xenophobic even, and they were under pressure to look further afield.

Anybody might have won that year. Yet my parents were delighted, and recorded a message of congratulations which was unfortunately screened at the ceremony, expressing their pride that I was promoting Martian culture to the rest of the galaxy so successfully. They also made some barely coded critical comments on the progress of Earth's colonialism and the need for Mars to reassert itself. It was embarrassing.

But when they next came to visit they seemed to regard me quite warmly and although I had imagined that their opinions did not matter to me, I was in fact wrong. I dislike the fact that I lay my principles to one side where they are concerned, but I do it nevertheless.

But this is a side issue. The main issue is why I should have stayed on Phobos. I also had a number of friends there – I find that I do not need many – and felt comfortable. Fungus being an unruly developer, the garden needed frequent maintenance and not only did I enjoy the work but I was also reluctant to hand it over to anybody else, even though Valentino was probably capable. I commented at the time that Valentino was trying to oust me so that he could take over, which he took as a joke although I wasn't sure whether it was. Ultimately, though, he completed his argument by saying that if I didn't go, wouldn't I always be wondering what would have happened if I had?

So I went, spending the journey building up romantic notions about fresh challenges. Yet when I arrived and had a chance to stand still and look over the garden from a window, I knew immediately that I would not like it. This was because I had seen the horizon.

Crofton

He dislikes the horizon. I disagree.

See how the arched earth does here

Rise in a perfect hemisphere!

The stiffest compass could not strike

A line more circular and like:

Nor softest pencil draw a brow

So equal as this hill does bow.

It seems as for a model laid,

And that the world by it was made.

Hass

Obviously I had known about it before I arrived. The planetoid is so small, any fool could anticipate the horizon's very visible curve. But I had seen the photographs Braxiatel had sent and thought that it looked... acceptable, at any rate. Upon arrival I had been hurried through to one of the Collection's conference rooms, where I could look out over the gardens from roughly ground level for the first time. Braxiatel had stood alongside me and we discussed concepts for the redevelopment, but I could only stare at the dipping edge of the land and feel a peculiar vertigo-like sensation. At first Braxiatel had assumed that I was perturbed by the condition of the grounds ('We're in the process of removing those heaps of slag,' he said. 'I assure you it'll be clear soon') and proceeded to explain his desire to create a garden that reflected the intricacy and richness of the Collection itself. Distracted, I apologised and explained (as politely as I could manage, and I do not think I came across as rude) my objection to the horizon.

Braxiatel examined the skyline himself and said, 'Oh, that. Yes. You'll find you get used to it – everybody does.'

I have not. The nausea I felt on that first day is still present as I stare from that same window now. Braxiatel enters the conference room, and apologises vaguely for being late and sits at the table. I look down from the window and hand him my letter of resignation. He coolly opens it, reads it carefully and invites me to sit down.

I refuse.

We exchange a few more brief words and I turn and leave.

When I emerge Bernice Summerfield from the Archaeology department is waiting for me on a sofa outside the conference room, reading through some printouts and wearing an underwhelmed expression. Is she here to see me? If so I am moderately surprised, as she has only recently started speaking to me again after I attempted to assist her with her paper. She looks up, sees me and screws the printouts into a ball. She tosses them into the ornate fireplace and jumps up to walk alongside me. I deliberately do not break step, forcing her to scurry in order to catch up with me.

'What did he say, then?' she asks.

I turn my head slowly to look at her. 'Should you not be working?' I say.

'Oh, that's nice,' she says indignantly. 'I'm here in support of a friend, I'll have you know. Plus I'm sick of hearing all the gossip second-hand from Ms Jones. What did he say?'

'Am I forgiven then for pointing out your errors?' I say, trying not to sound too hopeful.

She turns her head and regards me from an acute angle. 'No,' she says. 'I'm still holding it against you. But I don't want you to leave, because...' She stops, perhaps thinking that I do not follow her kind of humour. More earnestly she says, 'You really helped me, Hass. I owe you and I want you to stay around so I can return the favour. There. Plus, I... well, I don't like what people have been saying about you.'

I very nearly break stride. 'What have people been saying about me?'

Bernice opens her mouth, hesitates, then says, 'Nothing. Not really. So what did he say?'

'He suggested a "cooling off" period. Do you suppose that was intended to be a joke?'

'Did he say it with a straight face?'

'Yes.'

'Then probably, yes.'

'I happen to find it quite insensitive.'

'No you don't. Come on,' she says in a quite different tone of voice. 'Don't leave. It can't be that bad. You'll get used to the horizon.'

'I believe that less each time I hear it. The horizon isn't all.'

'There's more?'

I shrink back slightly into my armour and grumble, 'A great deal more.'

Crofton

I prefer paths that wind and flow, spaces that define themselves. Control is a subtle thing, and works best when the subject does not know it is being controlled. Plants know. That's why his rigid rows don't work.

Hass

I do not like the cat. It's an ugly, messy thing and it does not like me either.

Apparently, before I arrived the cat had often slept in the warmth of the greenhouse, preferring it to any other part of the Collection, but I made some changes which put an end to this practice. Not deliberately, you understand: it was merely that I wanted to create an environment where I could feel comfortable and cultivate some of my cold-climate plants as there is nowhere suitable for them in the main garden. Hence, I cleared everything out of the greenhouse (my predecessor did not keep the area orderly, leaving a great many boxes and pieces of broken machinery resting about the floor and walls) and installed an air-conditioning system, creating an environment of intense light and sub-zero temperature. I have not had time to fill the

greenhouse yet but it provides somewhere to keep the few plants I brought with me from Phobos, including my prized 'red willow' as the plant is inaccurately dubbed by humans.

On the same day that I switched on the air conditioning and was enjoying being able to work without my cold-suit for the first time since arriving here, the cat walked in. I had already unsuccessfully lobbied with Braxiatel for the cat to be denied access: the creature's needs are seemingly placed above all else by the administration. Certainly above my own, at any rate. The cat walked in and its step slowed immediately: it moved closer to the ground, almost crawling. It looked around itself, eyes wide, then it performed a full circuit of the greenhouse and left. It then returned once more the next day, did roughly the same thing in an abbreviated version and never came back.

I would have found this an acceptable turn of events had it not incurred the displeasure of many of my colleagues at the Collection, most of whom fail to understand my antipathy towards the cat. I appear to be the only member of staff who does not appreciate its presence. I should not be surprised if the creature is elected to become the next vice-chancellor.

The wretched animal even managed to pose a stumbling block with Bernice; I have since found her to be the only person here with whom I can enjoy a reasonable conversation. Initially she created a bad impression by saying, "Our gardener is a Martian"... sounds like a failed 1960s American sitcom to me.' (She later explained the reference, but still it wasn't funny.) I then made a bad impression on her by drifting into a lengthy tirade about the cat, before she eventually informed me that the animal belonged to her. Oddly this appeared to even the situation out and relations improved from there. She tried a little too hard to stress her knowledge of Martian history and culture, telling me things that I obviously knew just to prove that she knew them and mildly disparaging her own culture in order to praise mine. But she doesn't misinterpret me all the time (unlike some others), actively seeks my opinion on all kinds of matters and she laughs at my jokes. She flatters me. She often comes to the greenhouse to talk and has recently left a thick overcoat hanging there in readiness for her visits. She insists that the story of my father's perjury trial made her laugh more than anything has in years. And it now appears that we are even better friends as a result of my recent actions regarding her paper.

I keep telling her it was no bother on my part, and that the portrait her son drew of me is ample thanks.

Even so, Bernice's company causes more problems for me in other areas.

I understand that Wall, the builder, had once had some sort of sexual involvement with her, that he is the father of her son, and not that immature Kane she is publicly courting now. The details do not remotely interest me but they are clearly of great importance to Wall. I can only assume that he takes displeasure in whatever rapport I may have with Bernice as this would explain his surly and uncooperative attitude towards me. My requests are being treated as matters of low priority: the grounds are still not completely clear of debris and my first major project (I am working on a sunken garden to the rear of the Mansionhouse in the 'Victorian' style which I have become quite interested in) should have been completed by now. I almost feel embarrassed for Wall: I cannot imagine what it must be like to be so transparent and not even know it. Bernice has done her best to assist by dropping heavy hints to Wall, along the lines that she is looking forward to the garden being completed and so on. This has sped matters along a little.

Even so, I am uncertain as to whether I want the garden to be completed at all, as I have started to receive angry mail in response to a recent interview I gave to a popular landscaping periodical about my plans for the Collection.

Having noted that the commission was to create something in a broadly Earthen idiom, I stated that I looked forward to the challenge and that I hoped to investigate new and unfamiliar styles. Upon reading it back I felt it was rather bland, but others do not share this view. The same people who had feted me for my work on Phobos now castigated me for 'selling out' to the 'decadent and homogenised' human arts. What this is supposed to mean I have no idea.

This would matter less if I felt that I was gaining the respect of my colleagues here, but this could not be further from the truth. My frequent presence in the library draws puzzled stares, and I have often found myself informing people that my qualifications and publication record are at least as good as most of the academics housed at the Collection. I do not like to boast my credentials as I would prefer to be judged by my work, but I have started to recognise that paper credentials are the only recognised currency here.

A literary critic turns their hand to novels and nobody finds this odd: I have simply decided to pursue a career in practice rather than theory. This seems logical to me, and Braxiatel claims that my background was a major factor in my appointment. Yet I often find myself spoken to as an uneducated labourer, the way that people speak to Wall and his team.

This breeds resentment in me; I in turn appear to have bred resentment in others with my plans for the Collection's garden, although I fail to see how this is my fault as I am simply doing my job.

I am not prepared to oblige their requests that the garden be restored to its previous form and maintained that way. I am simply not interested in such a role. I have been engaged in a creative capacity and I intend to fulfil this brief to the best of my ability. I am sure that the residents of the Collection had become accustomed to the late Mr Crofton's style, but I do not feel that he would be well honoured by an attempt to keep the garden static (which people must realise is futile in any case). This, I think, irritated me more than any other aspect, as I explain to Bernice over drinks in the cafeteria.

'That was, until the garden returned to its previous form of its own accord,'

I note.

She nods sagely. Then she says, 'What do you mean?'

'Surely you can't have failed to notice.'

'I've been busy.'

I criticise her for her blindness, then I explain.

Crofton

I now find that I can watch every flower grow at once. It's like having the eyes of a fly, but with all the images slightly different and the ability to comprehend them all individually. The variety is where the beauty lies. Oddly, I feel that I have known this pleasure before, but this detracts nothing from the experience.

Hass

My eye rarely fools me. One must possess a keen awareness of slight differences in this line of work, so that one can deal with a problem before it gets out of hand. I was therefore confident of my perception on the Wednesday morning of last week that the sunken garden was no longer as sunken as it had been the day before. I had levelled off the ground at what I intended to be its lowest point and Wall and his team had started to construct stepping clay-effect brickwork from its centre. On that day I arrived to find the earth higher and uneven, although still tightly packed. The brickwork was partly submerged and in some places dislodged, as though it were drowning in a sea of soil. Small particles of earth rolled around the bottom of the pit, although there was no wind to carry them.

I'm afraid that I assumed Wall to be the culprit: he had, after all, shown little concern for this project and he would have had access to the equipment necessary to carry it out. I proceeded directly to his office and subjected him to more than eight minutes of verbal abuse that was only partly deserved (given his recent behaviour I estimate that he merited something closer to five). We briefly came to blows.

‘As you can see,’ I tell Bernice, ‘I still have pins in my left claw.’

‘Ouch,’ she says as she inspects it.

‘I would have minded less but it’s the one that I write with.’

Wall and I were separated by one of his subordinates and I went for treatment. Wall did not. I resolved to lodge an official complaint at the earliest opportunity, despite being warned by medical staff that this might simply result in charges being brought against myself for physically assaulting a colleague (I felt self-righteous, although I am now reluctantly considering apologising to Wall). I returned to the greenhouse in the hope of enjoying a more productive afternoon.

Yet there I noticed a change as well, in as much as my cold-climate plants were markedly less tall than they had been. I took measurements and checked their roots: they had indeed lost height, although they had not been pushed further into the ground. I was completely baffled. Checking the botanical section, which had been largely destroyed during the Occupation and which I had been instructed to restore as a matter of urgency, I discovered a most peculiar mess: the pathways and spaces which I had established had been encroached upon by plants to the point that I could barely see where those paths were supposed to be. Not that the plants were growing: they had *moved*.

I had carefully divided them categorically for easy access, yet it seemed that they resented my groupings and had decided to mingle, finally breaking the ice at their garden party. They seemed to indicate that I had patronised them by assuming that each type of plant would prefer the company of its own kind.

They did not appear to have been recently transplanted and looked as though they might have been there for months.

The pain in my claw was getting worse so I retired to my rooms for the evening.

On the Thursday I was alarmed to discover that the garden was still changing. The plants in the botanical section had altered their positions further, although they no longer appeared so disorganised: they were resolving themselves into a new arrangement and different pathways were emerging. Far from mingling, they were imposing their own order on the garden. They stood silent, innocent: but they had rebelled. I hurried to my greenhouse and encountered stifling, acrid heat and humidity. My air conditioning was not functioning, and I quickly discovered why: entwined in its workings was an unidentified plant, some kind of creeping vine which I had never before encountered in my career, holding it firm and preventing it from operating. I tried to pull the vine free but it resisted, and with a start I realised that it was capable of movement, writhing and tightening around the mechanism. I soon gave up as it was a matter of greater

urgency to rescue my plants, which could not survive in such an environment. I did save some by potting them and taking them to my rooms, but my prized 'red willow' died.

(I do not tell Bernice that I cried over the death of this plant.) Returning to the greenhouse two hours later, I had naturally expected it to be cleared of plants. Yet the reverse was true: plants had started to appear in all corners and in rows up and down the centre. They touched the walls and tumbled inwards, partly obscuring the light and making the space appear smaller. Far from being weed-like, these uninvited guests were bright, healthy and looked entirely legitimate. Pacing from one end of the greenhouse to the other, I soon noted the common factor: these were the plants which I had removed before making my climate modifications. I had transplanted them to another part of the grounds under a fibreglass awning as, although I had no plans to use them, I did not wish to kill them. As I pondered who might have moved them and so quickly, I detected a movement behind me and turned to see another of the vines which had sabotaged my air conditioning, twisting and flexing as it extended from the soil near Crofton's tomato plants. Its motion was disconcerting: I have rarely, if ever, seen such a mobile plant. It rose, dipped back down and burrowed into the soil; when it pulled back and emerged, it was wrapped around a large hunk of weathered blue plastic which it pulled free from the soil. gently, the vine let the plastic rest on the ground and rapidly retracted back into the soil, sufficiently quickly for me to wonder whether I had seen it at all.

What the vine had left behind was the shell of Crofton's old hover-mower.

When I had cleared the greenhouse those months ago I extracted the machine's working laser component and, not wanting to be accused of callousness, left the shell with the rest of my predecessor's personal artefacts.

The vine had just placed it precisely where it had stood on the day I first stepped into the greenhouse.

Further exploration of the grounds revealed that the sunken garden was almost full to the brim, and that a hillock adorned with flowers had swelled and bloomed nearby. I recognised it from the photographs that Braxiatel had sent me prior to my arrival: the photographs of Crofton's garden. The earth which I had flattened off had gathered itself again and been seeded. The bald patches across the lawns were now flush with grass; damaged trees which I had planned to cut down had regenerated; even the crumbled masonry had moved towards restoration, with many fallen pieces held back in place with more of the enigmatic vines. The day was particularly warm and the garden was busy. I stepped on through the sickly groves, fancying that I could

see the last signs of interference disappearing before my eyes, and after around a dozen people had congratulated me on my fine and swift work in piecing 'their' garden back together, I decided to tender my resignation.

Crofton

Do they talk? Only when there's somebody worth talking to. They are talking to me now, for example.

Hass

'Don't you want to find out what's going on?' Bernice asks.

'Not particularly,' I reply.

Her eyes narrow. 'But it's a mystery,' she says. 'It's there to be solved.'

'There's little mystery about it. It obviously has something to do with that vine that I kept seeing.'

'Well, there you go. This sounds like beginner-level mystery-solving to me. I'll play sidekick if you like.'

'Sidekick?'

'Yes, sidekick. I have four years' full-time sidekick experience, you know. Solo adventuring is all very well, but there's a lot of responsibility to shoulder if things go wrong. What kind of vines did you say they were?'

'I didn't. I didn't recognise them.'

'I thought you knew all the plants?'

'Not all.'

'How disappointing.'

'I'm sorry to disillusion you.'

'Hmm. Well,' she says, then stops short. 'Well. Why don't we inspect the scene?' When she receives no response she continues, 'Come on. Look, Brax wants you to stay, doesn't he?'

'Does he?'

'Yeah. He's under a lot of pressure to get rid of you, you know. People are saying things about you: mean things, ignorant things, even some accurate things on occasion. You resigning would've been ideal. But he turned it away.'

'He wouldn't want to admit that he appointed the wrong person.'

'Fine,' she says with a bit more edge, pushing her empty coffee cup away.

'Leave. But let's sort out this stupid garden thing before you go.'

I sigh. I suppose I should try to remove it, for the sake of whoever next has the misfortune to undertake this job. 'If we are going to do this, the obvious course of action is to dig it up.'

‘Right. Now you’re talking. And then, what, we kill it?’

I glare at her and shake my head. ‘We don’t kill it. Not unless we have to. We merely *remove* it.’

‘Oh.’

‘As a gardener I do try not to kill the plants if I can.’

‘Gosh,’ says Bernice. ‘You really care about the plants, don’t you?’

What a strange question. ‘Don’t you care about the things you study?’

‘I suppose so,’ she says as we stand and make our way out to the garden.

‘But they’re invariably already dead.’

We return to the greenhouse and approach the vine. It trails down from the air conditioning and into the ground at the base of the wall outside. Bernice wields a pair of pliers and crouches at the spot where it burrows; on the other side of the glass, I carefully sting its tip with prods from my shears and force it to retreat from the mechanism. The instant that it loses its grip on the workings it tries to slip back into the ground, but this is Bernice’s cue to clamp down with the pliers. The vine flails from side to side as she locks the pliers and tries to hold on; it beats itself against the ground in its attempts to free itself. I march quickly around the greenhouse and take the pliers from her, grasping them firmly in my right claw.

‘How many of these are there?’ she asks.

‘I suspect... only one,’ I reply.

‘One?’

‘Yes. With many arms.’

She raises an eyebrow. ‘I thought you’d never seen one of these before?’

‘I’m an educated person venturing an educated guess.’

‘What now?’

Still holding the pliers, I turn to face the greenhouse. Then I take a step backwards and tug sharply, exposing more of the vine from beneath the soil.

It wriggles and retracts in protest, but I simply step backwards again and take another tug. The heat is possibly the worst of the year so far, probably technically unbearable for my metabolism, but Bernice is correct. I cannot let this go any further. The soil tears up around the lime-green stalk as it emerges from underneath. I observe from which direction the vine appears to originate and step back in that direction.

And so on and so on and so on.

And this lengthy and repetitive process gives me an opportunity to regard the garden around me, and consider again what potential lies within it for a creative mind. The garden resists me now, but that might only be a demonstration of its character. It has to be overcome.

I am not a warrior: I am not used to fighting. It may be that I have simply never found anything I wanted to fight for. So now, a show of strength: I pull and pull and pull.

Eventually, the vine's weaving path leads to a point where there is no more left to pull. I give the vine to Bernice to hold; it appears to have become exhausted in its struggles. I, meanwhile, begin to dig.

Crofton

I feel a movement. I feel the warmth starting to penetrate. I know what is coming, and eventually I feel sunlight. I don't want to give up as I am wrenched from the ground, but I do not know what to do out here. I should know, but I feel as though this is not where I belong or have ever belonged.

They speak of me for some time, then one speaks to me directly: 'I'm sorry. But I am the gardener here.'

Then pain, and the garden is gone.

Hass

What we discover at the end of the vine is a hard nugget of plant matter with an almost claylike texture and layers of green in different shades.

'It's a bloody cabbage,' says Bernice, although she's wrong. Further vines sprout from its sides and network away through the soil. I wonder if it would be safe to cut those off rather than try to dig them out: the plant appears capable of sprouting as many as it requires.

'It looks a great deal like a Damon's Tender,' I tell her, relieved to be able to demonstrate some knowledge in the face of her recent scorn.

'A what?'

'Damon's Tender. Depending on its environment, it can accelerate the growth of nearby plants or it may inhibit them. Nobody has ever been able to find a logical pattern to its behaviour.'

'Oh, so *now* you recognise it.'

'I recognise this part,' I say, indicating the lumpish centre. 'These –' I point to the prehensile vines – 'are not normal.' I hope that nobody has tried to graft these on. One can produce horrifying results with such activities. In fact, if such manipulation is responsible, this thing would certainly qualify as a horrifying result. 'And it appears... to possess some kind of sentience.'

'I'll say,' Bernice says, gazing around. 'It's put the garden back to just how Mr Crofton had it. Right down to the littlest little details.'

I stare not at her, but at the plant. Its vines still writhe lightly. Removed from the ground, it seems impotent. 'Mimicry?' I

postulate. 'A reaction to recent stress and upheaval?'

'Carrying on his work,' agrees Bernice. 'Perhaps it thinks it is him.'

'I must confess... this is quite the most interesting thing I have seen in a long, long time.' In a strange way I feel humbled: as a plant, this thing that I hold in my hands perhaps has more right to be a gardener than I do. It is certainly a more effective gardener than I am, as the past few days have demonstrated.

But I will not let it take my role, because I want it. Yes, I do want it.

I bow my head slightly closer to the plant and murmur, 'I'm sorry. But I am the gardener here.'

And with my shears I cut the vines that still tie it to the garden.

A Summer Affair

By Joseph Lidster

It feels rather absurd of me to write a letter that you will never read, but, after the last few days, I am sure that I can be forgiven for indulging in a little foolishness.

I am going to tell you about my time with Ronan, about my brief summer affair. It was not love. I had known love before but what I had with Ronan was different. I truly believe that we both helped each other to forget about our pasts for that short time that we knew each other. The letter I now write to you is effectively a summary of my diary. Bernice told me that it was important for me to write down how I feel. It would be a difficult year and she believed that one way I would be able to 'get through it all', as she described it, would be to keep a diary. A diary? How perfectly ridiculous. What, I asked her, is the point in writing down what I know, for only myself to read? It seemed to me to be a waste of time and resources. Nevertheless, as she was perhaps my only friend here, I have taken her advice. I am glad that I did as it has helped me to organise my feelings into this one letter.

I suppose that the first order of business is for me to establish the context of my life as it currently stands. It has been a year since the Occupation ended and life, here on the Collection, has begun to return to normal. Indeed, it has now returned to normal for everyone, for everyone except for me. You see, one of the Axis officers was a man by the name of Bernard Moskoff. He was an average-looking man, of average height. His hair was greying and he always looked untidy. I loved him. I still love him. He is dead and I cannot stop loving him. I miss his smell, his face, the way his cheeks glowed red like a clown's when embarrassed. I miss his greying hair, his jokes at my expense. Every single morning, I notice that I miss his toothbrush. I miss the way he used to leave it on the sink. I miss the mess it used to make as the watery residue of the toothpaste would pool and drip. He would leave it there on purpose to see if I could ignore it. He knew I would risk being late for work by placing it in the holder and cleaning up the mess. And, every day, I did. And, every day, he would laugh at me.

No. No, you did not laugh at me. You laughed with me.

'How long does it take? When do I start forgetting him?' I had asked Bernice. As usual, her response had been emotional and unstructured.

'Clarissa, it isn't a science. Love can't be organised or planned for.' She began to wave her arms about alarmingly. 'Man meets woman.

Man and woman have sex. Man and woman live together. Man dies. Woman has a satisfactory period of mourning. Woman starts to forget about man. Woman moves on. That's just not how it works!'

Ah, Bernice. I have realised that Bernice is a wonderful person. Too wonderful. I appreciate her friendship but sometimes I am envious of her.

I know that that is wrong but she is what I used to be and what I could have been. She lives every day for the moment. She has been through more in her life than most of us put together. She could not be described as beautiful and yet she attracts men and women to her like moths to a flame. This is possibly because she smiles a lot. She has a son and a beloved. She explores other worlds and has extraordinary adventures. She is... well, she is Bernice and, as I said earlier, she is possibly my one true friend.

As you can imagine, my relationship with Axis Officer Bernard Moskoff was not popular with those that live here. I soon went from being the feared Ms Jones to being, as one Killoran eloquently described, 'that collaborating bitch'. Indeed, some of those people who had once respected or feared me then tried to kill me.

Bernard died to protect me.

You died.

After the Occupation, everyone else threw themselves into enjoying life once more. The end of the Occupation brought people together. Every day became a party. Bernice even found love again. I, however, was not part of this. Many still could not forgive me for my collaboration, for my love. I was offered no sympathy for my grief. I could not even hold a funeral for the man who died because of his love for me. Mr Braxiatel reinstated me in my position as Head of Administration (although my title was now Executive Secretary), and that became my life once more. Bernice, however, did try and understand. She became a good friend and her friendship with me encouraged others to gradually come to terms with the crime they felt I had committed. They could not forget though.

At the beginning of August, Bernice encouraged me to attend a party. As I said, there had been many during the previous months but, although I had been invited to them all by Mr Braxiatel, I had not attended them. I knew that I was not welcome and that he was inviting me purely out of civility. The organising of parties had also been taken off my task list. Mr Braxiatel had said he did not think it was appropriate. He was correct. I used to watch from my window as the people around me assembled in the various buildings across the Collection. Hours later, I would watch them leave. Many would be drunk. New relationships would have been forged. Life, it seemed, was

moving on for all except for me.

The August Ball was held to celebrate the first post-Occupation birth on the Collection. As usual, my invitation had arrived and, as usual, I had carefully filed it in the recycling container. Bernice, though, had felt that it was time for me to try to reintegrate myself into society. Perhaps, she would be right.

Perhaps, I would find that the new birth would help the others to forget about the past. The party was due to start at 20.00. Bernice told me that she would collect me at 19.30. I asked her if it was not fashionable to arrive late. She told me that that would mean 'less drinking time'. I could not argue with her logic.

As it happened, we would be late. She had not approved of my trouser-suit and had insisted that I wore a dress.

'Oh, and Clarissa?'

'Yes?'

'There'll be food at the party.'

'What do you mean?'

'No buns required!'

After Bernard's death, I had returned my hair to a sensible bun. I had, after all, become the functional Ms Jones again. I was no longer about to become somebody's wife. I reluctantly let my hair down and combed it straight.

'Better! Now smile! This is going to be fun!'

I despise exclamation marks and at that point I hated Bernice for being the type of person who you could hear use them. At that moment, I hated her for being her. I did consider the fact, though, that this might be an enjoyable evening. Perhaps people would be more accepting of me.

They weren't. Immediately, I remembered why I did not particularly enjoy parties. They can be so unorganised and cluttered. You have a responsibility to mingle and talk to each individual group of people. How do you know how long to stay talking to the same person though? What if you and he/she/it have nothing in common? It would be much simpler with a roster or timetable.

Bernice seemed to have the necessary skills and abilities to do this. She dragged me physically from group to group. People did not look pleased to see me but they were always happy to see her. She downed glasses of champagne and was loud and witty and wonderful as I stood there sipping a white wine that was gradually becoming warmer and undrinkable. Bernice is a good friend and did look after me but, as the night progressed, she became more and more interested in the other guests. She denied it, of course, and even claimed to be my best friend. I felt more like her mother. I knew that I was holding her back from enjoying herself so excused myself to visit the ladies' room. I

waited in there for what I considered to be the suitable amount of time for Bernice to have moved on and forgotten that I was there. When I rejoined the party, she had, indeed, done this. I placed my glass carefully on the table (away from the increasingly drunken revelling) and prepared myself to leave.

‘Clarissa!’ screamed Bernice. ‘Look!’

I turned and could not hide my smile. Bernice was salsa dancing on a table with an older gentleman. She called me over. I considered running out but knew that she would follow me, thereby spoiling her own evening as well as mine. A group was standing around the table clapping as she whooped and cheered and danced. I wondered whether I should clap too.

‘Don’t all just stand there!’ yelled Bernice. ‘Join in!’

The others, it seemed, needed no other encouragement. Suddenly, the room became full of dancing bodies. Again, the people on the Collection were living life to the full. And, again, I was conspicuously not.

I actually made it outside this time before I heard my name being called once more. I increased my speed, preferring the cool stillness of being alone in the dark. The voice called again. It wasn’t Bernice. The man who had been dancing with her was running towards me.

For the briefest of seconds, he could have been you.

‘Ronan!’

‘I’m sorry?’

The man tried to get his breath back.

‘My name’s Ronan.’

I told him that that was nice and started to walk again. I always walk at a slightly faster speed than others (I consider it to be a good time-management skill) and he struggled to keep up. He asked me to slow down but I did not. So he started to run sideways alongside me. It was quite comical but, again, I did not smile. Then, with what can only be described as a yelp, he tripped and fell into a shrubbery and I could not help but laugh. I looked down at him as he struggled to pull himself free. I reached down, helped him up and looked at him. He was slightly taller than average and slightly overweight. His hair was brown, as were his eyes. I could not be certain what age he was but surmised that he must have been in his early fifties. He thanked me for helping him and I prepared to leave. Then I stopped.

‘Why did you come after me?’ I asked.

He told me that he had been intrigued by me. He wanted to know why I had not joined in with the party.

‘Bernice sent you.’ It sounded more accusatory than I had meant it to.

He shrugged and said that that was correct. He held out his hand and I went to shake it. Then he reached down and kissed mine. I quickly pulled my hand away and told him that he was being over-familiar. Again, he shrugged and asked me to tell him about myself. There was something about him, something charming, so I did. I told him that I was the Head of Administration here on the Collection. There was a pause. Then he said: 'No, I asked you tell me about yourself. That's your job.'

It was my turn to shrug.

'That is my life.'

He told me that he found this very sad. I explained that I was perfectly content. He actually spat into the shrubbery which I felt was needlessly dramatic.

'Content? What the hell is content?'

I suspected that he may have had too much to drink so wished him goodnight. He told me to wait. I told him to leave me alone as I was finding the situation quite uncomfortable. As I walked away, he told me that he would meet me for lunch the next day. I called back, saying that I would be busy.

I did not immediately retire to bed as there was still work to be done. I put my hair back in its bun and sat down at my desktop. I needed to organise a new rota for one of the canteens and order some stationery for Mr Braxiatel.

These tasks completed, I went to bed.

And the next morning, I noticed that your toothbrush was still not there.

The morning was structured like most mornings. I checked that all the party guests had arrived safely at their own places of residence (or at least at somebody's place of residence). Many of them would be recovering from the night before so I cross-referenced the guest list with the various employee lists and ensured that cover had been delegated for those who were likely to be late for work. I chose some soothing music for the public areas (Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata) and ensured that the weather-control system was set at a moderate temperature. I checked that the larger order of coffee beans and croissants had arrived and was being distributed throughout the various cafes and restaurants. I then began to deal with Mr Braxiatel's appointments.

A communication informed me that the Sunari ambassador and his entourage had arrived two hours early. I surmised that Bernice and the other professors would be late for their meeting so informed the Sunari that, as a sign of respect, Mr Braxiatel had cancelled his other appointments so that he could meet them now. I decided to change the colour scheme on the gardening roster from blue and gold to a

more suitable brown and green. I had three short meetings and a training session for a more advanced computer program. Then, at 11.33, Ronan arrived.

‘Clarissa Jones! Time for lunch.’

I put on my glasses and stared, waiting for him to back away. It is a particular talent of mine.

‘You all right? Got something in your eye?’

I explained that I was perfectly fine but that a) I was not going to go to lunch with him and that b) lunch was not until 12.30. He replied that a) didn’t I want to get to know him and that b) the pubs would be full of students by then. As with Bernice, his words had a certain logic and I found myself starting to stand. Then I snapped out of it and explained that I couldn’t just leave my post. I needed to ensure that the Collection ran smoothly for all its inhabitants.

‘Why? It’s not as if they like you.’

I could not believe it. He was not just being over-familiar but downright rude. I told him that I would never go to lunch, or do anything else, with him.

‘How’s your bagel?’

Somehow, I found myself in Cafe Vosta with him instead of at my desk.

Somehow, I found myself eating a cream cheese-filled bagel instead of my hazelnut yoghurt. I did not know what it was about him. Perhaps, it was just the fact that he wanted to talk to me. Nobody else did. As usual, there were a few glances and the sound of shocked murmuring. As life bustled on around us, we talked. I asked him who he was. He told me that he was a *bon viveur*, a borderline alcoholic and a keen star-gazer. I smiled politely and asked him what his name and occupation was.

‘Ronan McGinley! Professor of Twenty-First-Century Literature!’ he announced.

As with Bernice, I could bear the exclamation marks.

‘And you?’ he continued. ‘Who is Clarissa Jones?’

I told him once more that I was the Head of Administration.

‘No!’ He was suddenly quite angry. That’s your job. Who are you? What are your hobbies? Do you like dancing or watching others dance? Cornflakes or a good fry-up?’

I looked up, startled. I told him that I did not know. I could feel tears stinging my eyes and I knew that one thing I did not want to do was to cry.

I knew this because I knew that if I did I would not stop. He took my hand and gently asked who I was.

Somebody on a nearby table muttered the word ‘bitch’.

I looked down at the plastic tabletop and examined it for any imperfections.

I hoped Ronan was doing the same. I shuddered as I felt someone at my shoulder. I expected it to be the person from the next table – having been brave enough to speak out, they often came over to make sure I had heard. But I had been so engrossed in trying to make myself invisible that I hadn't noticed Ronan stand up. He was walking over towards the young man who had made the comment.

'Is something wrong?' asked Ronan loudly.

The young man suddenly looked sheepish. I turned and begged Ronan to sit down. Instead he turned to face all the other customers and asked loudly: 'Can I ask if anyone here has a problem with me or my guest eating in this fine establishment?'

Suddenly, the murmuring stopped. Except for one woman who muttered something to her sniggering friend. Ronan stalked over to them.

'For God's sake, get over yourselves. Clarissa fell in love. The man died. End of story. And, while you're there bitching into your lattes and cappuccinos, just remember who puts them there.'

The young woman muttered that she was sorry. Ronan's attitude suddenly changed. Breaking into a friendly smile, he said that that was okay and walked back to me.

I hissed at him. 'Why did you do that?'

He just smiled at me and took a sip of coffee. 'I like you. I don't like to see people talking about you like that.'

I asked him how he could like me. 'You don't know me.'

He stared into my eyes.

'You are a sad, sad person. You've been through so much heartbreak. You've loved and lost. You throw yourself into organising and filing and optimising capability and focus groups and meetings and all that crap just so you don't have to deal with life. Look around you, Clarissa,' he grasped my hands, 'Life is moving. Life is living. You can feel it here! Live with them!'

'But... Bernard –' I began.

'– is dead.' He ended.

I stared up at him, suddenly angry.

'Yes. Yes, he is.'

'And he isn't coming back,' he said, almost smugly.

I think I actually screamed at that point. I know I ran out of the cafe and back to my apartment. I locked myself in and I began to cry.

For the first time since you died, I began to cry. I screamed at the one picture of you I had allowed myself to keep. I screamed at you not to be dead. I pleaded with God to let you come back. I smashed my computer

onto the floor then collapsed onto my bed and screamed myself hoarse with rage and grief and everything. Then, then I fell asleep.

Later that night, Ronan knocked at my door and I let him in. I let him hold me.

I asked him why it had to be this way. Why did the man I love have to be dead?

He didn't answer. He just held me and let me cry. Gasping for breath, I told him that I hated myself for continuing to work and live and breathe and... and... and be me when Bernard was dead. He told me that he understood and held me.

We didn't kiss. I want you to know that. We did not kiss.

The following morning, I woke up and he was gone. I was late for work but didn't really care. I did what needed to be done but no more. It somehow didn't seem important. Around 11 o'clock, Ronan turned up. He asked me if I wanted to go for lunch. I was stood up before he had finished the question.

We sat in the Garden of Whispers and ate a picnic. Ronan had prepared a substantial amount of food and an even more substantial amount of wine.

I nibbled on a biscuit and sipped at a glass. I told him that I needed to be back at work that afternoon as Mr Braxiatel was going to be away. He said that that was the perfect excuse for me to take the afternoon off. Logically, this was true, so I did. I'd programmed the weather systems to make today a sunny day so we lay down on the blanket Ronan had provided and talked. He asked me about Bernard. What had he been like? What interests had we shared? What happy memories did I have? And I told him. Even Bernice, as much as she cared, had not asked about Bernard the person. She had, understandably, not been able to see past the uniform.

Of course, I then cried again. But this time, it wasn't so... violent. This time it was more out of sadness than anger or an inability to comprehend. Ronan lay there in silence until I had finished. Then he passed me another glass of wine and asked what I wanted to do. Did I want to talk more about Bernard?

Did I want to talk about something else? Did I want us to be silent? Did I want us to create drunken mischief?

The thought of drunken mischief did sound pleasant.

I asked him how long he had known Bernice.

'Bernice?'

I explained that as I had not arranged his arrival on the Collection – 'Checking up on me, were you?'

As I had not arranged his arrival, I assumed Bernice had.

'What about that drunken mischief?'

‘Why are you not answering me? Ronan, who are you?’

‘Does it matter? Oh, it’s very dull,’ he said, once more topping up our glasses. ‘Born on Earth too many years ago. Married, no kids. Wife left me for a younger bloke. Was working at the Institute of Human History on Frastus Minima. Came here. Met you. Ate a picnic.’

‘It is a very nice picnic,’ I told him.

‘Nice? Nice?’ He jumped to his feet. ‘It’s not nice! It’s delicious and ambrosial and delectable and mouth-watering!’

I found myself laughing at his enthusiasm and agreed that it was, indeed, all of those things. He reached down and pulled me to my feet.

‘Come on, Clarissa. It’s a stupendous day! Let’s not waste it.’

He held my arm out with one hand and placed his other around my waist.

Then, humming a tune, he began to lead me as we danced through the trees.

I think the heat and the wine really must have had an effect on me, I felt so giddy. I looked up at his face and he smiled down at me.

‘This is better, isn’t it?’ he asked.

I replied, quietly. ‘Yes. Yes, it is.’

I asked what he was humming. He told me that it was by a composer called Dvorak. Allegretto from Symphony No. 8.

‘It’s ni—’

‘Clarissa!’

‘I mean, it’s...’ I struggled to find the word. ‘... enchanting.’

He thanked me and, under the glorious sunlight and through the bewitching trees, we continued to dance.

Later that afternoon, I returned to my home and fell asleep. I do not usually approve of sleeping during the day but it felt good. That evening, Bernice called round with Jason and Peter. I had quite forgotten that I had agreed to babysit. Bernice could see that there was something different about me so pulled me into the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of wine, a half-bottle left over from the picnic, and asked me how I was. She had that mischievous grin on her face. I told her that I was well. She asked me about Ronan. I told her that he was also well.

‘He is an interesting man. Bernice, I want to thank you for introducing us. Have you known him for a long time?’

Bernice shrugged and told me that she’d only met him that night. She took a large gulp of wine.

‘Did you not ask where he was from?’

‘Clarissa! What’s more important? Where he’s from or whether he can dance? Goddess, this is good wine!’

Despite myself, I again could see the logic in what she was saying. 'So, where's he from? Or have the two of you spent all your time dancing?'

'A place called Frastus Minima.'

The mischievous grin dropped as did the glass of wine.

'Bernice?'

She apologised and ran to the sink to get a cloth. As she mopped up the spilt drink, I asked her what was wrong. Eventually, she stopped scrubbing and looked up.

'I'm sorry, Clarissa. It's just that Frastus Minima... it was sterilised by the Fifth Axis. By Straklant.' She spat out the last word.

I looked down at her, not knowing what to say. The room suddenly felt very cold. The silence was interrupted by Jason calling from the living room.

Bernice snapped back that she would be there in a minute. Then she stood up.

'It might... it might not mean anything, Clarissa.'

'Bernice. He knows that I was engaged to a Fifth Axis agent. Presumably, he saw his friends and colleagues killed by the Fifth Axis. He must –'

She interrupted me, telling me that it didn't necessarily mean that he blamed me.

'I lost friends because of them. I don't blame you.' She placed a hand on my shoulder.

'I know and for that I am grateful. But, you know me. He does not'

I thought back to him telling me that the past was not important.

I wondered if that was true. Bernice asked me if I wanted her to stay. I replied that I would be fine and that she should enjoy her evening with Jason.

That night, I watched Peter play. I wondered what type of person he would grow up to be. I felt a sudden pang of sympathy for him as I knew that his life would eventually become a series of complicated events. He would have friends and enemies. He would love and he would lose love. He would have to watch people close to him die. When I began to cry once more, he toddled over to me and clambered up onto my lap. He grabbed hold of my glasses and began to play with them.

'You like them, don't you Peter?' I struggled to smile through my sniffing.

'Don't like it when you sad,' he murmured.

I hugged him tightly and said that neither did I.

The following day, I arrived at my office at the usual time. I knew that Ronan would be coming to see me again and I knew that I wanted to

know the truth before he arrived. If I were Bernice, this would have involved stealing spaceships and having passionate flings with men of a dodgy reputation. As she has her talents, though, so I have my own. I spent the next two hours searching every computer database I could access. It was not hard to find references to the attack on Frastus Minima. Thousands had died. I wanted to discover what happened to Ronan's Institute. What had happened to his friends? I wanted to be able to help him, the way he had been able to help me.

Perhaps, at the back of my mind, though, I always suspected the truth.

Within an hour, I had discovered that there had not nor had there ever been an Institute of Human History on Frastus. Within an hour and a half I had discovered that there had not nor had there ever been a Ronan McGinley living on Frastus. Within two hours I had discovered that Ronan McGinley, Professor of Twenty-First-Century Literature had actually been Lieutenant Ronan McGinley of the Fifth Axis – Lieutenant Ronan McGinley currently on the run from the authorities for his involvement in the Frastus Minima massacre.

I cannot quite remember what my initial reaction was. I think I may have even laughed. How much bad luck did I deserve? I know that that was quite a selfish reaction but it is how I felt.

Perhaps I was still being punished for loving you.

We met in the Garden of Whispers. Before I had a chance to speak, he told me that he had organised a party in his rooms in the Hamlet. There was a pause before I told him that there would be no more parties. No more wine. No more dancing. Not with him, anyway.

‘Clarissa? What’s wrong?’ He looked genuinely confused.

‘You lied to me. I know.’

He looked down at the grass.

‘I am sorry,’ he began. ‘He told me that –’

I interrupted him. ‘You lied to me. I asked you about your past and you lied to me.’

‘The past isn’t important. What’s important is the here and now. Life is for living, not for dwelling on how we got here or where we’re from.’

‘You don’t think that your past is important?’ I could not believe his lack of... his lack of concern at what he had done.

‘Why can’t we just live, Clarissa? I don’t care about your past and you shouldn’t care about mine.’

This was the final straw. How could he be so callous? How could the man that I had become friends with be so uncaring and cold?

‘Ronan. My past is what has made me who I am today. You may think that it is not important, but it is. I shall never forget Bernard.

He, and what he did, will always be a part of me. You and what you did will always be a part of you. We are here because of what we have done and because of what others have done to us. You cannot, you must not, try and pretend that what's past is unimportant. You cannot escape it.'

I will never forget you.

He looked sad, which surprised me. I had expected anger or self-pity. He just looked sad, as if he had been waiting for this moment.

'I'm so sorry about... well, about everything.'

I walked up to him. I kissed him on the cheek. I thanked him.

'For what?'

'For reminding me of who I am. For reminding me of what life is. For helping me to grieve and to feel and to live again.'

I then told him that he should leave. If the others discovered his past, they would not be so forgiving. Again, he looked confused.

And with that, I turned and I walked away. I did not look back.

And so I sit here, on the banks of the Great Trianon lake, watching as the sun sets. Autumn approaches and my brief summer affair is at an end. Well, it was almost an affair. This is who I am. This is what my past has created. Writing this letter to you might be the most illogical thing I have ever done but, as I am realising more and more each day, life, like love, is never logical.

I hope you are at peace, Bernard.

Love,

Clarissa

On the other side of the lake, he watches her as she sits and stares at the setting sun. He feels a chill as the darkness begins to fall. Poor Clarissa. He hopes that, one day, she will again find happiness.

'Ronan.'

He does not turn. He knows who is standing behind him. Instead, he shrugs helplessly.

'She knows who I really am.'

'No. No, she does not. She believes you were a soldier responsible for a number of unfortunate deaths.'

This does make him turn around.

'What? Why?'

And the man tells him that it will be easier this way. He needed to ensure that she would not search for Ronan.

'You know why you are here. You remember our first meeting.'

And many, many years ago on a world so far away, a man sits in an office.

He listens as the meeting continues. He listens as his fellow

employees discuss flow-charts and figures and how they see the next quarter progressing. Yet again, he wonders how his life has become this. He excuses himself and leaves the office. Leaning against the cool brick wall, he bathes in the sunlight. Suddenly, he feels free once more. He reaches into his pocket and takes a cigarette. Then he reaches into his pocket for his lighter. Damn.

He turns to the man standing nearby and asks for a light. The non-descript gentleman walks over and lights Ronan's cigarette for him. Ronan thanks him and the man introduces himself.

'Braxiatel. Irving Braxiatel.'

Back on the shores of the lake, Ronan McGinley and Irving Braxiatel talk.

Braxiatel reminds Ronan of the offer he made. An escape from his dull, tedious life and the chance to live properly. Ronan, once more, thanks him.

'But why have you made them think that I was some sort of... mass murderer? Why have you made her think that?'

Braxiatel sighs.

'I need you Ronan but I also need Ms Jones. I hoped that you and she would become acquainted. You've done a good thing, Mr McGinley. You've helped her, I believe the saying is, "move on".' He pauses. 'But I don't want her to follow you when you... disappear. When you fulfil your side of the deal.'

'I was always on... borrowed time, wasn't I? I guess that's why I... that's why I cared for her.'

Braxiatel seems genuinely offended. 'I have given you one last summer.'

'Yes, yes you have' says Ronan, quietly, 'and I have enjoyed every last moment of it.' Suddenly, he stares deep into Braxiatel's eyes. 'Don't let her be unhappy.'

'Oh, Ronan, I won't. She's one of the important ones.'

Braxiatel takes a step forward.

'It is time.'

And as summer on the Braxiatel Collection finally ends, Ronan feels the coldest of chills deep within his heart.

Night falls, summer ends and Clarissa Jones walks back to her home. She decides that she might call in on Bernice and Jason for a drink. She decides that it's time for her to start living.

No more letters. No more tears. Goodbye Bernard.

She does not hear a man's terrified scream as it echoes across the cold still black waters of the lake.

Denial

By Ian Mond

Benny liked to think they singled her out because they knew she'd feel compassion for their cause. The reality was they saw Benny as one of the few people who could influence Braxiatel. Little did they know.

Benny had been cornered leaving her room. She'd just put Peter to bed (Joseph was a wonderful babysitter) and was looking forward to a nice leisurely walk through the gardens. As she stepped outside her suite she was confronted by a short, stocky alien with skin an amazing shade of pink.

'Hello Professor Summerfield, my name is Janya.'

The hand it thrust towards her was pudgy and had far too many digits.

Benny stared at the hand, stared at the alien then stared at the hand again.

'I just wanted some time to myself,' she groaned. 'No Jason, no Adrian, no Brax, no monsters, no Peter (though I love him to pieces), no overwhelming urge to save the universe from total destruction, no homework to mark. Just me and the gardens.'

Janya's face turned blue. 'Professor, have I offended you?'

Yes you have, now bugger off.

'No,' Benny forced her most diplomatic smile. 'What can I do for you?'

Janya had come prepared. She'd hired out a small room in the Media wing and had invited three others of her race to meet Benny. Two of them, like Janya, were students, but the fourth was an associate professor in the Philosophy Department. His name was Mullinar and he turned a stunning shade of fluorescent green the moment he saw Benny. He raced over to her, grabbing hold of her hand as though it were something precious.

'Thank you so much for coming Professor.' He nodded towards the two students, who were sitting on either side of a table at the centre of the room.

'This is Ranya and this is Narten.'

Ranya and Narten struggled to look Benny in the eye. Their skin fluctuated between hues of green and pink.

'Please sit down.' Mullinar led Benny to the head of table.

Benny took a seat. 'Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I have absolutely no idea who you people are. Janya wasn't exactly

forthcoming; I don't even know the name of your race.'

'Ren tali,' Mullinar said, producing a folded piece of thin-sheet from his top pocket. 'And this is why you're here.'

The thin-sheet was, in fact, a flyer advertising the forthcoming arrival of one Professor Stamis on the Collection. Benny skimmed the details: names, times, places, and a brief description of the Professor. She noted the words charismatic, controversial and thought provoking and then she activated a tab on the right corner of the sheet. The detail was replaced by the face of a man, a man with pale white skin, piercing blue eyes and swept-back silver hair.

Benny wasn't sure how long she stared at the photo, but certainly long enough for Mullinar to cough politely and delicately slip the thin-sheet from her fingers.

'The Thazkans often have that effect. When they came to our planet, we thought they were Gods.' Mullinar folded the thin-sheet and returned it to his pocket. 'We had never seen such glorious beauty: skin that never changed colour, gossamer wings that twinkled like the night sky, eyes that made us drop to our knees and beg for forgiveness. When they started to kill us, we assumed it was punishment for our many and varied sins. That we were sick and they were our cure.' Mullinar's small lips trembled and his eyes moistened, his skin blushed a soothing orange. 'But the killing never stopped. We asked for forgiveness, asked to be shown the error of our ways, asked to ascend to their level of holiness. But they refused to listen to our words, and they continued to kill and kill and kill.'

'Then one day we woke up.' Now Mullinar's skin turned a putrid brown, and his eyes grew so dark they seemed bottomless. 'We realised they were not Gods. We realised they were the sinful and we were the righteous. We realised they intended to wipe us out.'

'So we fought back. We fought with everything we had, with stubborn determination and the will to live and the stubborn desire not to be the last of our kind. All they did was flex their muscles and continue the killing. This was a thousand years ago.'

'How did you survive?' Benny asked.

'A coalition of other species – races who knew what the Thazkans represented – banded together and drove them from our world. Not because they felt any compassion, but because they knew the Thazkans would next come for them. Once the dead were counted we realised that our Gods had butchered more than two thirds of our race.'

'And after this long, you still hate them.'

'No, precisely the opposite,' Mullinar said. 'We have been at peace with the Thazkans for more than nine hundred years. Our issue is with Professor Stamis. For the last five decades he has denied the holocaust

ever took place.'

Benny spent the next two hours with the Rentali, learning about the holocaust.

The Thazkans were a very precise race. They'd kept records of everything, including the names of most of the Rentali they'd killed. When given the opportunity, they'd even taken photos or film of the carnage. They especially focused on what they'd deemed the future of a dead race: the children. They'd lovingly captured the small boys and girls being herded into pens and slaughtered with savage glee. Often, the media room was filled with the screams of Ren tali young.

'Stamis denies all this?' she whispered.

'He says it's Rentali propaganda,' Mullinar said. 'He doesn't deny that Rentali died, but he argues that it was during a war with the Thazkans. He points out that Thazkans died as well and that their deaths should also be mourned.'

'So you want me to stop him from speaking here, speaking at the Collection.'

The four Rentali nodded. 'We know Irving Braxiatel will listen to you,' Janya said, her face the colour of ashes. 'And he is the only person who could stop Stamis from coming.'

'He only listens when it matters,' Benny replied.

'And does this matter?' Mullinar asked.

'Yes,' Benny said. 'Yes a lot.'

After meeting with the Rentali, Benny went straight to Brax. Well, she checked on Peter first, standing by his bed as he slept. She bent down, kissed his furry earlobe and brushed her fingers through his blonde curls. 'Love you,' she mouthed.

Braxiatel was in his study, sitting behind his oak desk and looking very much the Administrator. He wore an immaculate pinstriped suit, a silk brown tie and gold cufflinks in the shape of a double helix. He appeared to be occupied with such tedious work as signing tablets and reading through proposals.

'Ah, Benny. Thank the Gods you're here. I really do hate paperwork.'

Braxiatel pushed whatever he was reading aside and steepled his fingers. His smile wasn't exactly friendly, but at least Benny felt welcomed. 'How may I help you?'

Benny took a deep breath. 'I need you to ban Professor Stamis from speaking on the Collection.'

Braxiatel sighed, as if he'd seen this coming, though perhaps not from her.

'Benny... you can't ask me to do that.'

'I think I can. This man, this person who purports to be a historian,

how can we allow him to come here and spread his lies?’

‘What do you know about him Benny? What have you seen?’

She told Braxiatel about her meeting with the Rentali, about the documents, the photos, the films. ‘We only just got rid of the Axis, so how can the Collection condone this sort of hatred?’

Braxiatel paused, considering his words. ‘If I ban this man I am no better than the Axis. Perhaps he does pervert history, but he has a right to speak his mind.’

‘Oh come on, Brax! Do we really need to spend the next hour having undergraduate arguments over free speech and censorship? I know banning Stamis would have repercussions, but I also know that a line needs to be drawn.’

‘And when did you become an arbiter of that line?’

‘When I saw what they did, when I saw how they... butchered those people.’

‘I’ve seen the same footage and it repulses and disgusts me as well. But I support the free flow of information.’

‘As long as that free flow doesn’t concern you and all your precious secrets.’

‘Not relevant Bernice. My life has no connection to the way in which I administer my Collection.’ Braxiatel didn’t raise his voice; his tone remained smooth and professional. And yet Benny read his anger in the way he rubbed the tips of his fingers together, the way he hunched forward as though about to pounce. ‘I wanted this place to be about learning and study and discovery. Sometimes that means being confronted with those things you despise.’

Benny lowered her head, knowing she was beaten. She could keep pushing the point, but what good would it do? What would she achieve, apart from bursting a few blood vessels? This issue struck at the core of what the Collection stood for and, when it came to the Collection, there was no budging Brax.

‘So, you’re saying there’s no way we can stop Stamis from speaking.’

‘I won’t ban him, but I won’t stop you from speaking to the person organising the talk. If you can convince her, then I won’t interfere.’

The organiser happened to be someone Benny knew, someone she liked –

Professor Suze Mathers. Benny had met Suze over a year ago during a conference on Early Mioclese Development. At the reception, the two had started an argument over how many gods the Mioclese actually worshipped.

And like a fair number of academic arguments, it had ended with both of them very pissed and the best of friends.

Since then they had tried to meet at the Cottage once a month to

talk, argue and sample the variety of alcohol the Collection had to offer.

Now, as Benny hugged Suze in her office, she wondered how she was going to broach the subject of Stamis to her friend.

‘So how are you, Summerfield? God, I can’t remember the last time we had a piss-up. How’s that little Peter of yours?’ Suze was short and plump and never shut up. ‘That reminds me.’ She started searching her office, opening drawers, looking between leather-bound books, checking underneath her desk. ‘Bugger it; I specifically put it aside because I knew you were coming!’

‘Suze, you’re going to blow a valve!’

‘Ha!’ The academic produced a bottle of wine from underneath her leather chair, a small parcel dangling from the bottle-neck. ‘A present for Peter.’ Suze grinned.

‘He’s not drinking yet.’

‘Summerfield, the wine’s for you and that bloke of yours. Open the parcel.’

Benny did and discovered a pair of blue bootees.

‘My Great Aunty knitted them,’ Suze said proudly. ‘She said it was traditional.’

Benny slumped down into a chair opposite Suze’s desk. ‘Goddess, this is hard.’

‘What?’ Suze sat opposite Benny, her moon-face a picture of concern.

Benny pulled out the flyer from her pocket and placed it on Suze’s desk. ‘Are you really behind this?’

Suze looked at the flyer and grinned. ‘Yeah, and what a coup it was to get him here. They tell me he’s an amazing speaker. So, you want me to organise a ticket for you?’

‘Suze... this guy... why would you want to bring him here?’

‘Why not?’

‘Well for one he’s a racist –’

‘Who says he’s a racist? Come on Summerfield; don’t tell me you’ve been listening to all the bad press.’

‘Bad press! Suze, this guest speaker of yours is the poster child for Thazkan First, a bloody hate group.’

‘And he’s always denied being involved with those loonies.’

‘Oh, come on! You and I know that Stamis has a political agenda. History is just the tool he uses. How can you not see that he perverts everything that both of us stand for?’

‘Benny! What’s got into you?’

‘This isn’t about me.’

‘Really? This guy’s been around for the last fifty years and now you’ve suddenly decided to make a fuss about his politics. Where were

you a year ago when his last book was published? Or nine months ago when he did a speaking tour of the Seta Cluster? Why weren't you out there chanting slogans and holding placards?'

'I've been busy... you know bringing up a son, dealing with an Occupation...'

'Yes, and now that you've got some time in your calendar you thought you'd embrace another crusade.' Suze took a deep breath. 'Come on, Benny, when did this man's arrival on the Collection become so important? You may find it hard to swallow, but what he's doing is no different to what we do every day: trying to discover what really happened back when. Now I'm not saying this guy is speaking the truth, and I understand he's stepping on some toes, but that doesn't mean he should be muzzled. He should be allowed to speak and as adults we should have the right to hear his case.'

'And what about the Rentali? Just having him here is an insult to their culture.'

'And I'm sensitive to that, Benny. After I invited Stamis to the Collection I approached the Rentali and I offered them the opportunity to put forward an opposing side, but they weren't willing

'Because they believe that by arguing with him they give credence to his opinion.'

'I don't believe that for a second.' Suze's voice became soft, gentle. 'Benny, the two of us rewrite history every day. Every time you go on a dig there's the possibility you might find something that will change the way we understand a culture or belief system. That's the nature of our job. So you want me to stop him from coming?'

'What about the evidence, Suze?'

'That's the excitement,' she said, eyes twinkling. 'Knowing that he has a huge mountain to climb and wondering how he'll climb it.'

Benny realised this was the nub of the issue. This talk had nothing to do with the Rentali holocaust or the truth. Suze was thrilled by the thought of Stamis putting his reputation and career on the line by denying an event the establishment believed was true. And in Suze's eyes this made Stamis a true representation of academic courage; a man willing to stand tall against the opposition, the hatred, the criticism.

Benny stood, knowing there was nothing left to say.

'Will you cancel the talk?'

'I'm sorry, Benny,' Suze whispered. 'We're still friends though, right?'

Benny left the wine and bootees behind.

Despite her failure with Suze, a bright green Mullinar thanked Benny for the trouble she had gone to. He was now keen on finding other

means of getting their message across. Benny warned the Rentali against the use of violence, stressing that Braxiatel wouldn't take kindly to riots, bombs or assassination attempts. But Mullinar made it clear that any action they took would be peaceful in nature.

The Rentali was true to his word. Over the next few days peaceful protests were held throughout the Collection. They were small at first, but soon grew in strength as people were made aware of the situation. The day before Stamis arrived on the Collection, over five hundred people – including unlikely suspects like Parasiel, Hass and even a few concerned Thazkans – were demonstrating outside the History Department.

Benny, together with Jason and Peter, had joined a couple of the earlier marches, but mainly she'd spent her time in the History wing, researching the Rentali holocaust, researching Stamis. She'd made an effort to detach her emotions while wading through the masses of notes and journals and film and photos. And when she hadn't been able to take any more, Benny had retreated to the gardens, or a quiet dinner at home with Jason and Peter. Each night she had closed her eyes and tried not to dream of an angel with gossamer wings and silver hair stealing away her son.

Then, on the day Stamis arrived, on the day when five hundred people demonstrated outside the History Department, Benny made her first genuine discovery.

The flyer didn't do Stamis justice.

For one, he was over eight feet tall, an imposing sight on the large stage.

For another, his wings blazed with colour, an ever-changing oil slick, fluttering and dancing as he talked.

And Stamis knew how to play to his audience. He projected his voice across the large hall, a mellow, comforting sound that drew you in like the nectar of a pitcher plant. You laughed when he told a joke; you nodded when he said something insightful; you applauded when he drove home his point.

Stamis' argument was simple. The Rentali holocaust had been blown out of all proportion. He believed that most of the documents, footage and photos were faked. He pointed out that this wouldn't be a first, that in the last hundred years historians and archaeologists had been unearthing numerous contradictions in the bedrock of historical fact. Stamis did admit that Rentali had died, and some in shocking and brutal ways, but emphasised that the Thazkans also suffered great losses. War meant casualties.

Benny heard all of this from the back of the hall, watching the performance with dispassionate eyes. A part of her wanted to stand up

before all the academics present and denounce Stamis for the fraud he was. She wanted to show these people the films she'd seen, wanted this massive hall to fill with the screams and cries of dying Rentali. She wanted to engage with these academics on an emotional level, to make them understand that history was about real people, real events, real tragedy and not an intellectual conundrum they could discuss over champagne and canapes.

But Benny knew she'd only be wasting her breath.

So she sat and watched and collected her thoughts.

Braxiatel had agreed to arrange a private session with Benny and Stamis.

It had taken some convincing on Benny's part, assuring Braxiatel that she wouldn't do anything silly like try and strangle Stamis with his own wings.

The conversation – okay, the heated argument – had gone on for over an hour, but finally Braxiatel had relented.

'You'll have thirty minutes after the reception, and that's all I can give you.'

It was more than enough time for Benny. She wasn't going to muck around with small talk and humorous anecdotes.

Braxiatel had offered his own office for the private session, and Stamis was already there when Benny arrived, arrogantly sitting behind Brax's desk, sipping champagne from a thin glass. His wings were tucked beneath a long dark coat, but that took nothing away from the sheer beauty of the man.

Benny didn't care. Beautiful aliens were a dime a dozen and Stamis could never compete with the gorgeous three-year-old sleeping in a bed in Benny's suite.

'Professor Summerfield, what a pleasure.' Stamis made to shake Benny's hand, but she ignored the gesture, and took her seat opposite the Thazkan.

Stamis wasn't fazed. He walked over to an ice bucket and retrieved an expensive bottle of champagne. 'Can I offer you a drink?' He asked, filling his own glass.

Benny declined.

Stamis sat back down, his eyes never leaving Benny's face. *He's trying to suss me out*, she realised. *Trying to work out the sort of person I am, whether I'm a genuine threat or just another crackpot. Perhaps a little from Column A and a little from Column B.*

Benny finally broke her silence with a question. 'Does all the lying and propaganda bother you?'

'No, because I'm telling the truth.' Stamis sipped at his champagne.

He doesn't take me seriously, Benny thought.

‘I’ve read your books and I saw your talk tonight and, I have to admit, you’re impressive. I mean... I hate everything you stand for and yet I found you convincing. After tonight’s effort you’ll be the next big thing; academics throughout the Galaxy will begin to seriously re-evaluate the Rentali holocaust. Now that you’re out there, now that you’ve shown it can be done, others will follow. The mainstream is going to love you. So, congratulations. You’ve taken truth and given it a good bugging.’

Stamis put down his champagne glass. His eyes were deep and blue and totally unreadable. ‘How did they get you Professor? It must have been something close to your heart, something that meant the world to you.’

Stamis closed his eyes... seconds passed... and when he opened them again a faint smile creased his serene face. ‘You have a young boy?’

Benny gritted her teeth. ‘Don’t you dare.’

‘Rentali children being herded into a pen, little boys and girls who have no idea what’s about to happen. And you sympathised with those children, you saw your own son in that pen –’

‘Shut up,’ Benny whispered.

‘You saw him screaming and crying and calling for his Mummy –’

‘Shut up!’

‘And worst of all you saw him dying; you saw his blood splatter across the lens, saw his innards gleam in the sun, saw his head tumble from his severed –’

‘Shut Up!!!’ screamed Benny, and suddenly –

– she is standing on her feet –

– standing and moving and rushing towards Stamis –

– and all she wants is to hurt the Thazkan –

– scar his gorgeous face –

– tear off his glittering wings –

– kick his tall, ephemeral body –

– make him *scream*. Make him *beg*. Make him *plead for mercy*!

Benny never left her chair.

She stared into the eyes of the Thazkan, realising that this was how he played the opposition. He was good. He was really good.

She was better.

Benny smiled. ‘You should use that as an ice-breaker at parties.’ Stamis sipped his champagne, his eyes cold and distant. The Rentali are the ones who have twisted history. I’ve simply straightened out the mess they’ve left.’

‘You know, you never really explained the mountain of evidence.’

‘Most of it was faked. The basic images are genuine, but close examination of the film shows artificial imperfections, signs of

tampering and manipulation.'

'Of course, none of the original films exist. We only have copies of copies.'

'Precisely,' Stamis said. 'Professor Summerfield, there is so much evidence to the contrary. Purported Thazkan documents written in a style that was too colloquial and modern for the time. Evidence that two of the alien races that supposedly saved the Rentali were never involved. But it always comes back to the film... films that no longer exist in their original format. What we have now is a digital reproduction, each one open for abuse. You know that. I know that.'

'If only I could get my hands on some of that film.' Benny reached a hand into the pocket of her jacket.

Stamis leaned forward, his eyes widening. Did he doubt?

Benny withdrew a tablet, hiding it from Stamis.

He stared at her, eyes still cold, distant and unreadable. Benny looked down at the tablet, activating the screen.

Benny raised her eyes. 'Tell me about your two boys. Tell me about your wife.'

Stamis shifted in his chair. 'I don't see the relevance.'

'No, I don't suppose you would.' She placed the tablet on the table and slid it towards Stamis. 'But relevance is a matter of context, and when I read that tablet only a few days ago I realised that knowing about your boys, knowing about your wife, was very relevant indeed.'

Stamis picked up the tablet, scanning it quickly. He looked at Benny, never changing his expression. 'Where did you get this?'

'The Collection is an amazing place. Just when you think it can't hold any more surprises, you find something that changes you forever.' Benny leaned forward. 'You wrote that sixty years ago.'

'No.'

'Yes, Professor Stamis. Sixty years ago you wrote a paper questioning the ethics of Thazkan scientists using the scientific data they garnered from torturing and butchering Rentali. And in that piece, Professor Stamis, you call for other academics to be aware of the horrors of the holocaust.'

'This is a fake,' Stamis said.

'So, I have to ask myself, what changed? Why did you go from accepting the holocaust to denying it? Was it a personal tragedy, or a revelation from high?'

'More Rentali propaganda. More Rentali hate.' But for the first time Benny detected a tremble in Stamis' voice and knew she had to press on, knew she was close.

'As far as I'm aware that tablet holds the only copy of that paper. So if you destroyed the tablet you'd finally sever the last cord to your past. Just like you severed your relationship with your wife and two

sons. Why Professor? Why did you leave them? What happened?’

Stamis shook his head. ‘I refuse to be a party to –’

‘It’s hard to hide from the truth, hard to deny the cold hard facts?’

‘You have no right to make these accusations.’ Stamis’ expression had hardened. Not much more, Benny, just a little bit longer.

‘Did you mourn the death of your wife?’

‘How dare you!’

‘Did you celebrate the marriage of your eldest son?’

‘You would stoop so low!’

‘Did you cry when both your sons denounced you?’

Stamis slammed his fists against the oak desk, causing the champagne glass first to teeter then fall, cracking apart and spilling its fizzy contents across the desk’s surface. They both stared at the damage in silence, watching as the champagne pooled around the tablet.

‘Why, Professor? Why now deny something that you once admitted existed.’

Stamis closed his eyes. The pause that followed felt like it lasted forever, and for a moment Benny thought she’d lost her quarry.

Then Stamis spoke.

This is what he said.

‘Imagine a history professor just beginning his career at a prestigious Thazkan University. He is brash and young, brimming with ideas and not afraid to speak his mind. He is respected by his colleagues. He is loved by his family. He is happy with his lot.

‘But the world around him is changing. The Government is talking of extending its sphere of influence. It has just increased spending on the army and has begun funding jingoistic campaigns promoting the Thazkan way of life. Anti-alien protests emerge like spot fires in a forest and the Professor overhears his own students making racist remarks about other species and cultures.

‘The Professor is frightened and bewildered and angry. History is his speciality and he is fully aware his people have gone through a similar phase before, a phase that ended with the slaughter of billions of Rentali.

‘So the Professor attempts to remind others of the holocaust. He writes papers on the subject, but only one is ever published in a journal so insignificant it is easily forgotten. His people do not want to be reminded of their own bloody past. And, worst of all, when he visits the Rentali homeworld in an attempt to muster support, he realises that they are as apathetic as the Thazkans. To them, the holocaust is a story to frighten little children, a faded memory that is better left ignored.

‘One night, the Professor makes a decision, one that will change his life forever.

‘Two weeks after returning from the Rentali homeworld, the Professor leaves his wife and two young children without a word, without a note goodbye. The next day he does not appear for classes.

‘One month later the Professor re-emerges. But this time he is not the same man. Now he is denying the Rentali holocaust, describing it as propaganda and twisted history. At first he has supporters, those who see this as part of the ongoing pro-Thazkan movement. But words reaches the Rentali homeworld and suddenly the mood changes.

‘Those who’d been apathetic only a month before are now outraged. How dare a Thazkan deny the Rentali holocaust! How dare he deny the slaughter of so many innocent Rentali! The Rentali ambassador makes a formal complaint, but this only encourages the Professor to increase his campaign of denial.

‘In defence of their history, the Rentali begin a campaign of truth against the Professor. They produce movies and documentaries about the holocaust, build memorials and museums in the name of the victims and mark a day of mourning, where they can pray that such things never happen again. And throughout all this the Professor is derided and criticised and harangued and hated and reviled. Even by his own family.

‘And one day the Professor realises that the Thazkan Government has changed its tone, they no longer speak of extending their influence, they have reduced their spending on the army, they no longer promote pro-Thazkan campaigns.

‘At the cost of his career, his family and his life, the Professor had achieved his goal.’

Stamis lowered his face, as if embarrassed. Now that he’d unburdened himself he looked so frail and old; no longer the arrogant, charismatic giant, strutting across the stage. ‘I’ve never told anyone that story; I thought I would die with that secret.’ He raised pale blue eyes. ‘Is this what you wanted to know, Professor?’

‘You can call me Benny,’ she muttered. The strange thing was, Benny didn’t doubt Stamis was telling the truth. And that made things much worse. ‘You don’t need to do this any more,’ Benny said. ‘You’ve made your point. People remember what they’d once forgotten.’

‘On the contrary Benny, today proves that I’ve much work to do. I know from experience that academics are the most dangerous. They will justify any stance, no matter how prejudiced or twisted.’

Benny knew he was right. Sadly she’d seen it in Suze, this compulsion to rewrite history again and again. It occurred to her that soon these academics would be reinterpreting the recent Axis

invasion, prodding at the known facts and looking for holes in the logic. And if they couldn't find answers, they would simply make them up.

Nothing was sacred anymore.

'I understand your intentions, but what if it all backfires? What happens when mainstream history accepts your theories as the truth?'

'This is the risk I take. But despite what you said earlier, I believe that will never happen. Many of those who heard me tonight, like Ms Mathers, were already disposed to my way of thinking; every time I speak, I expose the people who are no longer interested in the truth.' Stamis walked over to Benny, and his face echoed her feelings, a mixture of sadness and anger. 'You must keep this between us; you must let me see this through.' He squeezed her hand as if looking for assurance.

Benny shook her head. 'I...'

'Please Benny.' Stamis fell to his knees. 'I have never begged, but I must finish my work.'

Benny closed her eyes, knowing what he wanted her to do, wondering if she had the right.

She opened her eyes, leaned across the desk and gathered the tablet, dripping with champagne. She saw the words of a young academic, striving to shed light on the truth, striving to make his voice heard.

Without hesitation, Benny raised the tablet and smashed it hard against the corner of Brax's oak desk.

Sex Secrets of the Robot Replicants

By Philip Purser-Hallard

‘Who the sodding hell,’ Bernice demanded, ‘is Dr Jonas Neak?’

Jason froze in the doorway to her rooms, keycard still in his hand.

Benny watched her ex-husband’s expression surge from guilt to panic, then subside into nonchalance. It still amazed her sometimes, the transformation his features had undergone in the past year – from those of an irritating git she couldn’t stand the sight of, into those of the irritating git she loved above all others.

‘Well?’ she said.

‘I’m sorry?’ Jason frowned. He raised an eyebrow to convey additional sincerity. ‘Who?’

Shortly before lunch, Bernice had been at work in the Braxiatel Collection’s Second Reading Room, scraping together some notes on intellectual-property dowries among Anteiropes’s Enth Era civilisation. Ironically, the data on the topic was patchy – even the modern Anteiropics tended to be tight-fisted with their information – and Bernice had already been in a frustrated state of mind when she became aware of someone hovering over her shoulder.

‘Professor Summerfield?’ murmured the newcomer, twitching back and forth. The Assistant Librarian was constantly in motion – essentially an iridescent five-foot dragonfly, she seemed (perhaps quite literally) incapable of settling in one place. ‘I was informed that you are, mm, in contact with Mr Jason Kane.’ The librarian was a recent arrival on the planetoid, one of the staff recruited to fill posts left vacant during the Occupation by ‘poor people management’. (‘The sort of management,’ Bernice had explained to another newcomer whilst quite drunk, ‘that makes you go, “My God, those poor people...”’)

‘We’re seeing each other,’ Benny said. ‘For lunch, I mean. Is there something you wanted me to tell him?’

‘Mm, yes indeed,’ the Assistant Librarian hummed. Her voice was quiet and respectful, but overlaid with a persistent whine of oscillating wings. A while ago, Bernice would have automatically assumed that Jason was hoping to meet the insectoid for his own specialised ‘research’ purposes. These days she could have more confidence in him than that, thank heavens.

‘Mr Kane has some library loans outstanding,’ the librarian continued.

‘I am afraid he has allowed them to become extremely overdue. I wondered if you might, mm, be kind enough to jog his memory?’

‘Jason has library books?’ Bernice asked, puzzled. The concept did seem fundamentally unlikely: Jason barely opened a book from one month to the next. His only association with the things had come in the course of his sporadic career as a hack author, churning out lurid tomes of xenopornography – ‘erotic’ novels dealing with human-on-alien action, and vice versa. Benny had recently been dismayed to discover that he was writing them again – she had thought he’d grown out of it at last. She considered her beloved’s sideline a mortifying embarrassment, and usually did her best to avoid thinking about it.

The flickering figure bobbed assent, and Benny realised that this could be serious. Dr Armbruister, the Senior Librarian, had a reputation for treating defaulting borrowers with severity. Even Irving Braxiatel was punctilious about returning library books on time.

The Assistant Librarian lowered her voice. ‘Dr Armbruister has been speaking,’ she droned, ‘of assembling a, mm, working party to visit Mr Kane at home and remind him of our borrowing regulations. He has been seeking volunteers particularly, mm, among our larger, more physically robust colleagues.’

Bernice shook her head wearily, thanked the librarian and decided it was time to break for lunch. She crammed her palmtop into her satchel along with a stack of books and papers, and left the Reading Room.

Distracted by the Assistant Librarian swooping vengefully down upon some chattering military historians, she failed to register a bearded, tweed-draped man on a collision course with her. The bowed head of the academic (and oh dear, he so very obviously urns an academic) came suddenly in danger of intimate contact with Benny’s cleavage. He emitted a tiny squeal of alarm.

‘So sorry,’ gasped the man, continuing to stare downward in a manner which Bernice couldn’t help but consider rather personal. His accent, surprisingly heavy for someone who worked in academia, was one she couldn’t place immediately. ‘Wasn’t looking. Goodbye.’ He scuttled for the nearby shelter of the Literary Theory bays.

In places like the Collection, this sort of thing happened so often as to become routine. Bernice tutted anyway, just for formality’s sake, and went to meet Jason for lunch at Vosta’s.

At lunchtime her lover was his usual cheery self, becoming tetchy only once she brought up the matter of the Assistant Librarian’s message. During the course of five minutes he proceeded from a determined stance of ‘Library books? What library books?’, through an interim position of ‘Oh, I expect they’re about the place somewhere,’ to a

decisive, ‘Benny, for Christ’s sake forget about the sodding library books, okay? It’s fine. Everything’s fine.’

‘Well, forgive me for preferring you with your legs intact,’ Benny had muttered. Jason made a characteristically tasteless comment concerning amputees, and the conversation proceeded on to other matters.

His evasiveness worried her, however. Thus, a few hours later, she was creeping furtively around his rooms, opening cupboards, unearthing boxes and inspecting certain unhygienic nooks and crevices where no sane woman – and no deranged one without comprehensive medical insurance – should have been peering.

So far she had succeeded in assuaging her guilt at this intrusion by reflecting that, if Jason hadn’t wanted her to ferret through his stuff every so often, he should have known better than to give her a copy of his keycard. It wasn’t the most compelling self-justification she’d ever mustered, but it was holding up for the moment.

She just had to resist the urge to tidy as she went, or she’d be here till Samhain.

Eventually she ran the books to ground in Jason’s underwear drawer – implying that he really hadn’t wanted her to find them. She hefted them out and set them down on the unmade bed. The pile was a dozen volumes high, traditional bound-paper format like many of those in Braxiatel’s inventory. All fell into the general class of literary criticism, although their approaches looked to be a rather random mishmash of femto-formalism, post-fetishism and a couple of smugly ironic New Freudians. Nothing suggested any obvious reason for Jason to be ashamed of borrowing them, or indeed to have borrowed them in the first place. Except for...

Bernice frowned. ‘What the buggery?’ She slid a hardback from the very bottom of the pile. Its dust jacket was decorated with a sepia-tinted photograph of a naked man, performing something anatomically inappropriate with an equally unclothed female Lacaillian.

The title was *Towards a Pornographies of First Contact: Probing and Delving the Fiction of Jason Kane*, by one Jonas Neak Ph.D. Bernice riffled the pages, boggling at the illustrations and noting the absence of the Braxiatel Library’s identifying holomarkers. This copy must be Jason’s own, she guessed. The chapters all had titles like *A Life in Bondage: Kane and the Politics of Liberation* and *Towards a (Deferred) Climax: The Xeno Paradox*. She opened up a random page, and read:

Sojak contends that ‘knowing the alien’ through the medium of sexual relations necessitates an ‘epistemology of carnal knowledge’: if this transspecies discourse/intercourse is to be extended to engulf the (cunni)

linguistic, then it is equally essential that oral transmission be subsumed in oral performance. Precisely such a conjunctional systematic may be observed at work in Kane's seminal Tongues of the Mollusc-Women.

Benny closed the book and sat down gingerly on Jason's rumpled, sweaty duvet.

After a moment, she turned the volume over and remonstrated with the author's photo. 'You surely cannot be serious about this,' she told Dr Jonas Neak. 'Oh, for Goddess' sake,' she added, as it dawned on her that the critic was a dead ringer for the beardy tweedy man who'd taken such a noticeable interest in her bosoms earlier. 'Pervert.'

She was rewarded by a sudden swallowing noise. Benny turned towards the bedroom door, fully intending to demand of Jason what in heaven's name was going on before he could ask any awkward questions of his own.

Instead (and, idiotically, she glanced down at the book cover to check), Dr Neak himself was standing there, gazing appalled from somewhere behind his facial hair at the exposed morass of Jason's underpants. 'Er – sorry,' he squeaked. 'Wrong rooms.'

Again he turned and fled, leaving Bernice staring after him, numb-faced in sudden realisation.

'I'll tell you why I ask,' Benny told Jason later. At her instructions he had come inside and sat down on her sofa, instead of standing frowning in the doorway.

'I ran a literature survey today, cross-referenced against your name, and it threw up more than a dozen papers by this Neak bloke. It turns out that over the last couple of years there's been quite a critical interest in your... oeuvre.

'The odd thing is that the major scholars in the burgeoning field of Jason Kane Studies all have highly plausible names like –' she consulted her printout '– Dr Jan Reason, Prof Anne Sojak, Dr Ken J Aason and – oh yes, someone was obviously feeling unusually creative last September – Prof Arsenio W Cockshaft.'

'Benny, I can explain,' Jason protested weakly. The sofa was the one Bernice inflicted on awkward students during her tutorials, and from the way he kept shifting position, his buttocks had already discovered why.

'Of course you can explain, Jason,' she retorted. 'It doesn't take a genius – any more than it does to fake academic credentials, apparently. Did I mention that all these people, the men at least, look just like you? Oh, they all have ludicrous dress sense and various unfashionable arrangements of facial hair – obviously, I mean, they're academics, aren't they? – but all the faces are yours. Except for Prof Sojak, who I couldn't help noticing looks quite a lot like me, only with

larger breasts.'

'You faked your academic credentials once,' said Jason sulkily.

'That, Jason, is about as far from being the point as it's possible to be within the confines of the current universe.'

'All right, Benny,' he said. 'Just shut up a sec and let me explain.'

Bernice subsided, fuming.

'It's no big deal,' Jason began, showing more optimism than good judgement.

It seemed it had all started as what passed in his mind for a joke, prompted by self-righteous indignation after a visiting academic had humiliated him at one of Braxiatel's receptions. Learning that he had just been introduced to a professor of Comparative Literature, Jason had casually mentioned that he was, it just so happened, a bestselling author – and then had been compelled to admit which one. The woman had proceeded to denounce his sexual and interspecies politics, decry his use of imagery and allusion and demolish for good measure his plotting, dialogue and prose style. All this she had delivered with the contemptuous assurance of one who had offhandedly perused Jason Kane's entire output in a weekend.

'Snotty-nosed cow,' Jason said now. 'God knows why I even told her who I was. I mean, okay, I may have been trying to impress her, just a bit, but I definitely wasn't trying to get inside her knickers. There was none of that. I just wanted to hold my own in conversation, you know?'

Benny rolled her eyes. 'I shall ignore that.'

Shortly after this, Jason continued, he had acquired the library books, and taken a week's holiday on a nearby beach planet to digest them. He had returned with the skeleton of Jonas Neak's first paper, "So Long, Sucker!"

The Rhetoric of Loss and Longing in Jason Kane's *Nights of the Perfumed Tentacle*. It was a splurge of significant-sounding quotes, paragraphs cribbed from elsewhere with the details changed and a couple of genuine insights into the novel, assembled with an acute ear for how academics sounded when spouting a particular variety of cultural-theoretical-jargonistic bollocks. (This last part – Jason's innate ability to bullshit, basically – was, to Benny's mind, the one true authorial talent her beloved possessed.) A few days' work with his antiquated word processor had sufficed to finish off the article, and Jason had submitted it to the journal *Prevarications* along with an impressive and entirely phoney set of references. It wasn't unambiguously clear to Bernice what he had been hoping to achieve by this.

'I reckoned,' Jason enthused, 'if an uneducated slob like me could fake it, then that stuck-up bint couldn't have been so clever as she

thought she was.

So maybe I wasn't so bloody useless after all. You see?' Benny couldn't quite fathom whether he had been intending to prove that the literary establishment should take the novels of Jason Kane seriously, that it could shove its worthless critical judgements up its self-satisfied arse, or, confusingly, both.

What was apparent was that there had been unexpected benefits to Jason's ruse. When the next royalty statements had arrived from Velvet Mandible, his porn publishers, they had shown a small but respectable sales spike in the months following the article.

It was at this point that Jason had had his brilliant insight. 'People like to read mucky stuff,' he asserted now. 'Intellectuals as much as anyone else. If they can do it feeling it's totally legit, they'll spoon it up.'

Hurriedly he had assembled more articles from Dr Neak, submitting them to various periodicals. After a while it had occurred to him that a variety of critical approaches might bring in a wider readership, and so he had created other false identities to accommodate them. The deception had steadily inflated the sales of his other, less respectable but more legitimate authorial enterprises.

Inspired, Jason had begun work on another xenoporn novel, the first in years. He planted carefully-hidden subtexts for his various academic alter egos to find and squabble over – and soon an acrimonious controversy between Neak and Prof Cockshaft over Kane's politics of sado-masochism had propelled *Slave-Sluts of the Slime People* to a record performance in several of the sector's more idiosyncratic bestseller lists.

'And look,' Jason said proudly. He produced from his pocket a printed flyer for a forthcoming conference, the type that adorned departmental noticeboards across the Collection. 'They're asking me to be the guest of honour. Local celebrity author, all that.'

'You?' Benny asked him. 'Or one of your pseudonymous admirers?'

Jason appeared hurt. 'You should be pleased for me, Benny. You've never supported me in my writing career.'

'I certainly don't support advancing it through intellectual fraud!'

'But these articles are popular,' Jason argued. 'There's money coming in from reprints, network publication, anthologies, all that sort of thing. I've even put together a collection of my own – of Jonas Neak's, I mean, obviously.'

'And how did that sell?' asked Bernice casually.

A horrified look abruptly overtook those oh-so-bloody-familiar facial features. 'Oh –I forget.'

'How many copies?' she repeated, icily.

Jason told her.

‘You utter bastard,’ Benny said.

From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield:

Oh... it was predictable enough, I suppose, that Jason’s fake academic book would sell better than any of my real ones. Bloody infuriating, but predictable.

He’s absolutely right – we all enjoy reading about rude stuff, even third-hand.

I should have specialised in Assyro-Babylonian fertility cults, or twentieth-century rubberwear or something.

That wasn’t the worst part, though. I mean, the intellectual dishonesty, the utter disrespect for basic professional etiquette, using the whole of academia as a scam to sell more porn – that’s just Jason. The smug, stubbled ponce.

It seems, though, that when I met Jonas Neak today, despite the obvious appearances, it wasn’t Jason in disguise. Not legally, anyway. Apparently the conference organisers didn’t want just Jason in attendance – he’s had invitations through for all five of his fake personas to take part in a panel discussion with the Great Man. He was just going to make excuses and get them all to send new papers – hence all the library books. But writing a whole conference worth of papers is a bit of push, even for Jason.

His creative solution to this dilemma has been to secretly commission ProxyMations™. The one I saw is standing in for Neak, and there’s another wandering about the Collection pretending to be Professor Cockshaft. He says he would have had Aason and Keason made up as well, if he hadn’t thought that would start looking way too obvious.

I’d really like to say I thought he had more ethical sense than this. But this is Jason I’m talking about, after all – ex-husband, current life partner, and moral vacuum strong enough to Hoover a cathedral.

I mean, I can see why Braxiatel allowed the ProxyMation Corporation to open up an outlet here. They’re cheaper than manlikes – the androids favoured by the megarich – and, more importantly, questionable though it is, the technology is becoming pretty standard for conferences. Also the Corporation provides vital jobs and income for a number of former Fifth Axis worlds which were left in economic crisis when their governments collapsed.

(In fact, Braxiatel has a theory that the ProxyMations™ are back-engineered from certain characteristic technologies left behind by the Axis’s alien masters, but that’s hardly the workers’ or the shareholders’ fault).

I can even see that ProxyMations™ can fulfil some necessary functions. If there’s only one person with the hard-won expertise to

rescue people trapped in an unstable space station or wherever, it makes no sense to risk the expert when you could just send in a copy. That's a reasonable use of the technology, I suppose, but what really annoys me is the trivial, self-indulgent stuff. Can't make it to that vital business meeting? Just commission an android duplicate to make it for you!

Oh yes, the psychotechs at your local ProxyParlor can deep-scan your brain-pattern and imprint all your memories into a cybernetic simulacrum. The construct can meet, negotiate and socialise, all exactly as you would. You can even give it temporary power of attorney. As far as it's concerned it is you, although the Corporation's always conscientious about briefing the product.

You get the satisfaction of squaring the vanity circle, proving you're both indispensable and far too busy to be bothered with trivia. Your ProxyMation™, on the other hand, gets a month of life at the very most before it comes home, has its memories sucked out for you to download at your leisure, and gets shut down. (Its body gets recycled for the next commission, obviously – no wastage there.) A functionally perfect copy of yourself – or, if you're greedy like Jason, two perfect copies – gets condemned to a brief life and early obsolescence, for your convenience.

It doesn't bother most people, of course. Well, not the sort of people who commission ProxyMations™, anyway. Some philosophers have tried to justify it in terms of 'construct ethics' – how technology redefines the boundaries of the individual, the self as spiritual property, 'soul licensees', all that sort of thing. Jess Carter wrote something about it not long ago. The fact remains: by any reasonable definition, a ProxyMation™ is a self-aware person.

Which means the man I love has created two people – each one a thinking, feeling individual, identical to himself apart from the comedy facial hair – who'll die the moment he's finished with them.

I mean, how precisely does he expect me to feel about that?

Later:

More to the point, how do I expect him to feel? I would expect a tiny smidgen of remorse or doubt, or concern at the very least. Apart from anything else, those guys must hate his guts. Jason must be well aware of how he'd feel in their situation, and serene acquiescence would not be on the menu.

Although... I wonder.

For years now, Jason has been trading off his experiences in the Cluster, where I first met him. He had to live there for years as the only human among dozens of alien species. Putting his unique physiology to work in the Cluster's sex industry is the kind of creative

response to the situation that only Jason could have had, but I understand he had to do whatever he could to survive.

Even so, being treated like that – valued solely for the perfunctory thrill your body could provide – would be deeply degrading. Too much of that and you'll start to think of yourself as a sex toy, just to preserve your sanity.

He hides it well from most people, I know, but Jason really doesn't like himself much. Why else would he have been so stung by getting snubbed by some intellectual bimbo at a party?

I know the roots of it go deeper than his time in the Cluster, back to his vicious bastard of a father – but even so, I think he set a pattern there. He turned himself into a doll for aliens to pleasure themselves with. Later, he made those experiences, that past, into pornography for random strangers to wank over. Then, when even that writing got too real, he turned it into an object of scrutiny for these made-up academics – who, if I was feeling New Freudian myself, I'd say were obvious extensions of his superego.

And now this latest thing. He's literally turned himself into an object, a mass-produced, assembly line product. He's made another Jason – two more Jasons – who he himself can use and have destroyed when he's finished with them.

My lover must *really* hate himself.

It makes it bloody difficult to love him sometimes.

[Extract ends]

**Textu-AI [ien] [Entities]
a two-day conference around transspecies
issues in genre fiction**

Monday 22 and Tuesday 23 October 2604

in the Paglia Rooms, Braxiatel Collection, KS-159 (third floor)

with guest of honour

Jason Kane

(In Different Flesh, Sins of the Pseudopod,
World of the Vixenoids etc.)

Seminars

Lectures

Buffet Lunch

Disco

For details and ticket prices contact Dr R J Plemph,
Interspecies Literature Dept (extension 108094).

‘If I might kick off the proceedings then, Professor ah, um, Cockshaft,’ Dr Plemph said. The assumed name had already occasioned the convenor one lengthy coughing fit, his orange pipe-cleaner limbs trembling as they splayed in multiple directions from his chair. Evidently Dr Plemph had succeeded in retaining his undergraduate sense of humour, one located not a million parsecs from Jason’s own.

‘It’s noticeable,’ the literary scholar continued, ‘indeed, it has been noticed, that all the major scholars of the Kane canon are of human extraction. Is this significant, Professor, in your opinion?’

The ProxyMation™ pretending to be Arsenio Cockshaft nodded animatedly.

He and the tweed-sheathed Jonas Neak facsimile sat at Plemph’s left, up on the podium. On the convenor’s right, beside an empty chair, sat Jason – the original, as far as Benny was aware. The auditorium was packed with far more audience members than there could plausibly be xenoerotica specialists in the sector.

‘Well, that’s an interesting point you raise, Doctor,’ said Cockshaft, in an outrageous accent very nearly distinguishable from the one employed by Neak. He was decked out in a bow-tie and velvet smoking-jacket, and sported an absurd handlebar moustache. To Bernice – sinking ever lower in her front-row seat and trying her utmost to resemble someone else – the fact that he, like Neak, was Jason’s double was embarrassingly obvious. Still, she was far more

familiar with her ex-husband's voice and face than the rest of the audience – at least, she damn well hoped so – and so far the deception seemed to be convincing them.

Even as an android duplicate, though, Jason was a really terrible actor.

She tried to concentrate on what the Cockshaft construct was asserting. 'Mr Kane's work treats sex as an erasure of the boundaries between the familiar and the foreign,' he said, 'the self and the not-self. To Kane, each act of xenophilic copulation is an encounter with the Other.'

For complicated reasons, Benny squirmed. One of the first and strongest factors that had attracted her to Jason was how entirely dissimilar the two of them were.

'Naturally,' Cockshaft went on, 'since the novels figure this relationship in terms of interspecies intercourse, the presentation is such that one species' viewpoint will inevitably be privileged. And given Mr Kane's own genetic origin, well...'

Neak leapt in with: 'What you're failing to take into account, Professor, is that coition is a reciprocal process. Non-humans may engage with Kane's work reflexively, in terms of their own encounters with otherness. To a non-human, sex with *Homo sapiens* is just as exotic as exosexuality is to you or me, and one man's xenopornography is another being's anthropoerotica. I believe Kane's work knows this: he gets inside the skin of what one might parochially term his alien characters –'

'The skin? Oh, at least,' said the original Jason, raising the predictable laugh from the audience. 'Yeah, Jonas, I think you're right. And don't forget most of my novels have a big helping of alien-on-alien stuff, too – different species making it together, I mean. My books are intended for non-human readers too, and I've had some very appreciative comments from that quarter. In fact, I have a message here that came this morning, from Miss Myrgle Xloom of Betelgeuse V...'

Bernice covered her eyes.

The seminar proceeded in this vein, with Neak and Cockshaft dividing between themselves the privilege of acting as Jason's straightman.

Grudgingly, Benny had to admit that the whole thing was well orchestrated.

The critics came across as sufficiently authoritative to imbue the works of Jason Kane with borrowed gravitas, yet also pompous enough to be put in their place by his down-to-earth charm. The signing session at the campus bookshop was going to be a sell-out, she could tell.

After half an hour of the symposium, she could even sympathise with Jason's need to create destructible replicas of himself. Right now she too felt like killing him several times over.

A student scurried onto the stage and passed a note to Dr Plemph, who looked as if he'd lost the will to live. He glanced at it, and said, 'Might I just interrupt you, Dr Neak?'

Neak nodded graciously, and Plemph continued, 'I gather Dr Aason – that's Ken J Aason, author of *Raising Kane: the Primal Scene ReMembered* – has just arrived. We had thought that he wasn't able to take part in this panel, but – do please come and join us, Dr Aason.'

A horribly familiar figure shambled up the steps onto the podium, shook hands with the various participants, and settled next to Jason, who sat gawping at him. The new arrival had absurd ginger sideburns, and wore a jacket and trousers in frayed green corduroy.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' said Dr Aason. His voice – just like his face – was yet another implausibly-inflected likeness of Jason's own. 'Big bureaucratic cock-up. You know how it is with us academics.'

'Well,' Plemph said soothingly, 'we're glad you're with us now.'

If this was just another grandstanding trick on Jason's part, then Benny's other half was doing an awfully convincing imitation of bewilderment.

'As am I, sir,' Aason declared, 'as am I. I bring with me some information which I'm sure will fascinate all of us here who've taken an interest in Mr Kane's fiction – and in these gentlemen's criticism of it.'

The audience stirred, and even Dr Plemph appeared to perk up slightly.

'Whatever do you mean, Dr Aason?'

Panic was crossing Jason's face now, as he tried to work out some way of discrediting this new arrival without inserting concepts like 'android' or 'impostor' into people's heads. Cockshaft and Neak appeared entirely unruffled. 'Let's hear it, then,' said Neak, his accent slipping somewhat.

'These people are android impostors,' the Aason ProxyMation™ grandly announced. 'My university has checked their credentials very thoroughly.'

There are no such individuals as Arsenio Cockshaft or Jonas Neak.' There was some nervous laughter from the audience, which Aason quelled with a grave look. 'The men you see before you are artificial intelligences in the employ of Mr Kane's publishers,' he said. 'They have been working – with Mr Kane's full knowledge, I might add – to further the sales of his pornography.'

Jason was standing up. 'That's bollocks!' he shouted. 'This bloke's the impostor! Christ knows where he came from, but –'

But Dr Plemph was on his feet as well, and his species had a lot of them.

‘Excuse me, Mr Kane,’ he said, taking Jason’s arm quite gently between six of seven of his own, ‘but these are serious accusations Dr Aason is making. Dr Aason, are you entirely clear about what it is that you are saying?’

Aason leaned back and smiled. ‘Absolutely. The whole arena of Jason Kane scholarship has been fatally compromised by these gentlemen’s conflict of interest. They have been hired by Velvet Mandible to promote sales, and everything that they have written has been directed solely to commercial ends. Isn’t that right, sirs?’

The Neak and Cockshaft ProxyMations™ exchanged glances.

‘Ah well,’ said Cockshaft, dropping the accent totally, ‘it’s a fair cop.’

‘You said it, Prof,’ agreed Neak. ‘He’s got us bang to rights.’

* * * *

The media had a field day, of course. At Jason’s insistence, all the major newsfeeds had been well represented at the conference, and they obliged with very generous coverage. They, too, had noticed long ago that porn sold product.

Velvet Mandible rushed out a panicked statement, denying knowledge of Neak, Cockshaft or their writings, which was greeted with general derision.

Jason had to cancel his forthcoming signing tour, and holed himself up in Benny’s rooms, yelling occasionally at journalists who tried to call them. Poor Dr Plemph was forced to call off the remainder of the conference, and recompense the attendees out of his departmental budget.

Bernice met the ProxyMations™ at Vosta’s, a few days later. They had stripped away their respective whiskers and put on sensible clothes, so that she could no longer tell which of the three had been Cockshaft, Neak or Aason. They looked, in fact, like identical triplet Jasons, sitting in Jason’s favourite alcove drinking his preferred variety of cappuccino.

‘Hi, Benny,’ each of them smirked as she arrived, and winked at her. This was, she realised, liable to get extremely weird.

From what Benny had been able to gather, the third ProxyMation™ had been generated at the request of an anonymous client, from a backup version of Jason’s mind-print which the ProxyParlor emphatically should not have had in storage. (It turned out that this feature was a relic of the alien systems emulated by the Corporation’s engineers, who had no idea how to turn it off.

Extensive legal proceedings appeared inevitable.) It seemed that the

duplicates had hatched the plot to discredit their original almost as soon as the first of them had left the production line. It was partly in the hope of filling the gaps in her reconstruction of events that Bernice had agreed to meet up with them: they took great pleasure in explaining it all to her, their voices doubling up and overlapping as if she were conversing with an ambient Jason remix.

‘We got in touch with Palp Fiction,’ one of the Jasonoids was boasting.

‘Velvet Mandible’s biggest market rival. We offered our services.’

‘The whole Jason Kane Studies industry was giving Mandible a big boost,’ another said. ‘We told Palp we could put a stop to all that.’

‘They gave us a decent deal,’ the third android confirmed.

‘So they paid for the third ProxyMation™?’ Benny managed to interject.

‘Yeah,’ the first of the simulacra said. ‘And in return for seeing off the competition, we get downloaded into permanent bodies –’

‘Proper organic ones,’ another put in, with a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows.

‘– and get given rolling contracts to turn out xenoporn for Palp’s Black Latex range.’

‘To full Jason Kane standard, natch.’

The smug expression on the three faces was the very one that Jason always wore, when explaining how particularly clever any given scam had been.

‘We may even use the false names still,’ said – oh Goddess, she’d lost track now – said one of them. ‘You know, seeing as they’re better known now than when His Nibs was using them.’

‘How is the old man, anyway?’ another asked her cheerily.

‘Upset,’ she answered. In fact, her Jason had spent the week depressed and furious by turns. He had sufficient self-awareness to blame himself for all of this – a distinctly more honest form of self-criticism, which Benny felt encouraged by. She found she hadn’t had the heart to lecture him, and this reassured her too. She didn’t like to see herself as a moralistic person.

Even so... ‘It wasn’t enough just to get yourselves new bodies, was it?’ she said. ‘You had to find a way to get back at him.’

‘He should have thought of that before, then, shouldn’t he?’ One of the androids shook his head censoriously. ‘No way was I going to let that bastard switch me off.’

‘He got off lightly, if you ask me,’ another said. ‘It’s not like it’ll do his career any harm in the long run.’

‘This kind of notoriety’s actually great for sales,’ agreed number three.

‘He’ll do well out of it.’

‘Probably would have gone along with it, if we’d asked him.’

‘I mean, if we can have the idea, he could. Stands to reason.’

This conversation was giving Bernice a headache, unless perhaps it was the espresso. ‘I’m not sure he’d agree with you there,’ she said. There was a brief lull, as the ProxyMations™ tried to work that one out.

After a few moments, the nearest Jason said in a mournful tone: ‘I miss you, Benny. I know you don’t remember us being together, but I do.’

‘Oi,’ another of them retorted. ‘We said we wouldn’t do this! We’ve all got the bloody memories, there’s no point going on about it.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ grumbled the third. ‘Who wants a cheap knock-off when you can have Mr Oh-So-Original?’

‘It’s not like you’re into foursomes,’ said another.

‘Fivesomes.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Yeah, well,’ the nearest Jason concluded miserably. ‘You’ll always be special to us, Benny.’

‘Well, that’s nice,’ she said.

Another pause ensued, and Bernice took advantage of the opportunity to carry out some frantic philosophical calculation.

‘You’ll be staying with him, then,’ another of the duplicates declared, at length.

‘Yes,’ Benny said decisively, ‘I will. And frankly, you should all have thought of that beforehand.’

The constructs looked identically affronted. ‘Eh?’ they chorused.

‘You all have Jason’s memories,’ she said, ‘up to the point when he visited the ProxyParlor. You all remember taking the decision to have the copies made. If you want to lay claim to that life as you remember it – well, that means facing up to its responsibilities. If Jason’s to blame for your existence, well then, so are all of you. You asked to be born, unlike the rest of us. So...’

She tailed off. There was a lengthy silence between the four of them, while the cafe’s clientele continued chattering outside the alcove.

‘Fair point,’ one of the Jasons eventually conceded. Bernice let out a slow breath.

She swallowed her last mouthful of coffee and said, ‘It’s the way life goes, boys. You made the decision, now you have to live with it.’ She stood to leave them, ready now to walk back to her rooms, her work, her Jason – then turned again, to smile with fondness at the sight of their identically downcast faces.

‘Live with it for a long time,’ Benny told them gently.

The Blame of the Nose

By Ben Woodhams

‘Congratulations, Bernice. It can’t be every day that you manage to kill two people before getting out of bed.’

Benny stood in the doorway of the Ancient Manuscripts Research and Restoration Centre, deep in the stacks under the Mansionhouse, trying to catch her breath. A gaggle of students were rubbernecking behind her, morbid curiosity getting the better of them. Despite her reputation as one of the nicer academics to be found on the Collection (something she was secretly proud of, especially the ‘academic’ bit), Bernice had elbowed a few of them out of her way to make a point.

Braxiatel was waiting for her between the Martian Unskraals and the Icelandic Eddas, making a point of his own by checking his fob watch.

Waiting, it seemed, to accuse her of murder.

‘I have run,’ she panted, ‘like a painting left in the rain.’

‘You look like one,’ Braxiatel told her, and walked away.

She followed him through the stacks to the main research area, a pokey little room with low-slung strip lighting, full of desks. Across one of these, slap in the middle of the room, Bernice could see a man with his head buried in a book. No, not a man. He was some sort of bipedal saurian in a nicely tailored linen suit. It took a moment of wondering why he was examining the text so intently before she noticed the trail of gelatinous drool running from his jaws across the page, over the table and, without breaking, onto the floor.

‘Hold on a minute!’ Bernice exclaimed. ‘I know those books! They’re mine! What’s a dead saurian doing dribbling on my books?’

‘Tell me, Bernice,’ Braxiatel began, ‘have you ever actually read these texts?’

‘What? Of course I... Er, well, no. Not as such,’ she admitted under her breath, glancing back towards the doorway in case anybody overheard.

It had caused quite a fuss when the famous and respected doyenne of academe had returned triumphant from a field trip with thirteen volumes of perfect-bound ancient manuscript in ‘as new’ condition. The existence of a buried library on the planet of Nachos 7 (or something – Benny couldn’t quite remember the name of the place, if she was honest) was news to everybody, and had got the interplanetary archaeological community running around like headless gimmies for a couple of weeks back in March, before they

found something more exiting to talk about.

The sad truth (which Bernice guarded with ferocity) was that the whole thing had been a spectacular accident for which she was all too happy to take the credit so long as *Archaeology Tomorrow's* correspondent was pointing a camera at her good side. She'd been babysitting a bunch of students and, while they fruitlessly sifted through the dust of an exhausted dig, kicking the sand in boredom, had stubbed her toe on what turned out to be a rather fetching cornice in just about the last place anyone could have expected it to be. Below which: the hidden library (actually, more of a bookcase, but that's media hyperbole for you). In which: the books. From which: all-too-fleeting minor academic notoriety. The fact that no one knew what the books were, or could even read them, had seemed a bit secondary at the time. They were just very, very old – that was what had mattered. When Bernice had expressed a lack of interest in actually researching them ('Don't we have experts for that sort of thing, Brax?'), they'd been swallowed by the Collection's stacks, waiting for someone to decide they were worth bothering with.

Someone, apparently, had decided they were worth bothering with. And had dribbled on them. Posthumously.

Braxiatel let out a deep breath.

'What?' demanded Bernice. 'Why are you pfffting like that? And why are you saying I killed this guy? Who is he?'

'There are few academic fields with as much potential for hokum and nonsense as archaeology, Benny. No, don't sneer – we both know it's true. Second Millennial Terran art studies, civil engineering and archaeology attract all sorts of, ah, fringe thinkers. Are you familiar with the legend of the Harrassi?'

Benny's eyes performed a spectacular roll that felt like it came close to dislocating them. 'Oh, Brax, not that! You'll be telling me Atlantis never sank next. Or that homeopathy contradicts all the known laws of physics. Or the Thazkans never...'

'I most certainly will not. But our dead colleague here managed to hold similarly controversial views, despite the fact that he was an esteemed and respected literary historian from the H'squvannan University of Divine Secular Balance. Bernice, meet Doctor Kardom. He'd been searching for the lost Epic of Othere.'

Bernice considered rolling her eyes again, but they were still recovering from the last loop so all she could manage was a squint.

'Wait, wait. I know this one. It's supposedly the only example of Harrassi literature we "know" of – except for the fact that it's missing, and has been for hundreds of thousands of years. Assuming, mind you, that it ever existed in the first place. Nobody believes in the Harrassi anymore, Brax. They're a hoax, a fairy tale that grew out of all

proportion, a conspiracy theory for the kinds of people who're out to disprove Von Daniken...'

'Well, apparently Kardom here believed in them. Believed in them enough to decide that esteemed archaeologist Professor Bernice Summerfield had at last found concrete evidence of their existence, in the form of a great literary epic. With fantastic merchandising potential and paperback rights, no less. So he requested official permission to come and have a look at it...'

'And you said yes. Good grief. Brax, have you any idea how cheesy this sounds? There's even this whacko mystical legend that anyone who reads the whole thing will drop down dead. Presumably of bore... Oh.'

'Quite,' said Braxiatel, staring down his nose. 'Except that Kardom here was killed by a bioengineered topo-fractal polytoxin.'

'A whatsytootie what-what?'

'A microscopically dilute poison, a different element of which is embedded on each page. So faint that it didn't show up on our standard tox-screen.'

Fiendishly clever. It collects in the skull behind the nose cartilage, page by page, until the sequence is complete. I imagine it gives a slow reader just enough time to get to the end.' Braxiatel gestured over to where the medibots were now gently manoeuvring Kardom's inert body onto a suspensor-gurney.

'Et voila. He'd been here for weeks, going through the manuscripts.'

I suppose,' he added, thoughtfully, 'that if he didn't think he'd found what he came for, he'd have left by now. I wonder if it was worth it?'

'So that's what you meant when you said I'd killed him.'

'Only in the sense that you made the discovery, and brought it back to the Collection loaded with a highly lethal polytoxin.'

'And you know this because...?'

'Because of the girl you killed.'

Bernice buried her face in her hands. 'This just gets better,' she groaned.

Almost as though he was rubbing it in, Braxiatel took her outside to show her where it had happened. Back in August, he told her, a research chemist had checked out one of the less important manuscripts, for the purpose of conducting practical tests on some revolutionary new preservation chemicals.

She'd been taking it over to the Collection's de facto chemistry facility, had just stepped out of the library into the sunlight, when she'd suddenly keeled over in front of a group of exchange students on a day trip from the outer rim systems who were already suffering from culture shock as it was.

Bernice vaguely recalled reading something about it on the

Collection's netboard. Previously undiagnosed heart disorder was the coroner's best guess, but you could tell he didn't really believe it. It didn't seem to matter much at the time, what with the body being shipped back to her home planet and, according to local custom, stuck in some kind of primitive ritual magimix, boiled down to a goo resembling that yellow Turkish Delight with nuts in you find in starport gift shops, and served at her funeral. It was only when the funeral party provided a repeat performance of her keeling over, en masse, that the first real evidence of poisoning surfaced.

So when Kardom had taken a nosedive into (what he believed was, Benny reminded herself) the long-lost mythical epic he'd been seeking for his entire career, Braxiatel had understandably wondered whether these incidents could be related, and thought he should be told. And – surprise, surprise – it turned out that, despite his insistence that there was nothing quite like engaging with material on a tactile level, Braxiatel had been getting the Collection's manuscripts scanned.

Bernice's supposed Epic of Othere had been one of the first to get the treatment in a pilot project, immediately followed by some obscure accounting documents of no real historical or literary value, because they were due to be borrowed by the chemistry facility for testing...

So a great gob (well, a microscopic gob, but it was still bloody dangerous) of fully reconstituted and almost unimaginably deadly topo-fractal polytoxin had been stuck on the scannerbot, who then unwittingly wiped it all over the following hundred or so texts. All of which, along with the scannerbot and the original manuscripts of course, had now been declared severe biohazards and sealed off. It was just sheer fluke that they had all been exactly the kind of serious, dense texts that many academics make a career out of avoiding, otherwise the death toll could have been far, far higher. This would, Bernice pointed out, have saved taxpayers across hundreds of planets countless millions of monetary tax units that could have been better spent on hospitals or something, but Braxiatel said that wasn't the point. He was, he assured Benny, working on a way to decontaminate them for the literary welfare of future generations; although she suspected that a great many academics would rather they were shot into the heart of the nearest star instead.

Bernice watched in silence as the inert, contorted body of Dr Kardom drifted by, guided by the medibots to the hospital facility as a rubber-cased medi-technician gingerly vacuum-packed the volumes themselves.

'Perhaps it would be a good idea for you to accompany the texts over to the hospital,' suggested Braxiatel.

'Gosh, what a good idea,' Benny mumbled flatly. 'That way I can be

surrounded by reminders of the deaths I've caused all day. Why didn't I think of that?' Her stare felt like it should burn a couple of holes in Braxiatel's head, but all she got for her troubles was a bemused blink.

'I was thinking more along the lines of getting yourself examined while you're there,' he said. 'After Kardom himself, you've received most exposure to the poison. That'll happen when you carry priceless historical artefacts in your hand luggage, by the way.'

'Sorry.'

'Quite all right,' said Braxiatel, mangling an attempt at a comforting pat on the shoulder. 'If you'll excuse me, I've got colleagues,' (he mouthed the word with distaste), 'to deal with.'

He strode off to confront the growing army of students thronging outside the archive, who were demanding to know why their entire research facility was being wrapped in plastic and whether this would mean a shift in *the* grade bandings for their end-of-term tests.

Benny followed the medi-technician with the books and snuck out the back, avoiding both the students and the increasing number of heavily armoured Killorans saying things like 'Hup, hup, hup' very loudly as they formed a defensive cordon around the facility.

She was not having a good day.

'Yup,' said the medic at the Collection's hospital facility as he pulled a now-icky probe out of her left nostril with a 'plip'. 'You've got bits of topo-fractal polyvirus up your nose all right.'

'But it's not dangerous, is it? Not unless I decide to go back and read the rest of it?'

'Or rub the entire text over your naked body, that's right. Judging by the initial samples from the actual manuscript, you barely got halfway through the introduction, Professor. Boring, was it?'

Benny confirmed that it was, before she realised that she actually had no idea. And possibly the only man in the universe who did know whether her glorious find was any cop was now stretched out on a gurney, waiting to be shipped back to H'squavarna. Braxiatel had a point. She was, on some level at least, responsible for his death.

'Of course,' said Braxiatel when she saw him for tea in his office that afternoon, 'people die on the Collection all the time, even when it's not being occupied by a ruthless fascist regime. Currently we have,' he cast an eye over his teacup at the deskmonitor, '4,637 sentient organics living on, working for, or visiting the Collection. Plus Wolsey. And this is the off-season. There's a certain rate of natural attrition that occurs, not to mention the occasional fatal heart attack brought on by sheer intellectual over-stimulation. I can't be held responsible for any of those – certainly not legally, anyway, I've checked – but that doesn't stop me feeling the sting every time.' He

sipped his tea, looking, Benny decided, conspicuously unstung.

‘I know,’ she said, despondently fishing half a soggy garibaldi out of the bottom of her cup. ‘And I know it’s not my fault.. But there’s a difference between fault and responsibility. He was a bookish academic working on a poisoned manuscript. I killed him just as surely as if he was a chronic alcoholic and I’d locked him in a room with a crate of vodka.’ A thought occurred to her. ‘What’s happening to his body?’

‘I understand it’s being shipped back to the University of Divine Secular Balance, once the medical facility have had their fun and taken all the necessary samples. Doctor Kardom had no immediate family, so they’re planning to inter him there.’

‘I’m going to see his body off.’

‘I think that’s pushing the bounds of responsibility perhaps a bit too far, Bernice.’

‘No, I killed him, Brax,’ she said. ‘The least I can do is wave goodbye. Thanks for the tea.’

Benny got up and headed for the door, acutely aware of Braxiatel watching her face for any sign of, well, anything. She paused in the doorway and sighed.

‘All right. What it is, is... It just seems to me,’ she said, ‘since the Axis... With the reconstruction and all that...’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, it seems like I’ve been waiting for things to get back to normal. And this... this doctor, killed by a bioengineered topo-fractal polytoxin created by a race of omnipotent superbeings who may, or may not, exist, planted on an ancient manuscript that I found by accident...’ She looked up at Braxiatel.

‘This is normal, isn’t it? It doesn’t *get* much more normal than this.’

‘I’m afraid you’re probably right,’ said Braxiatel. ‘Good afternoon, Bernice.’

Benny felt wretched for a week. Even Jason’s attempts to cheer her up had precisely the opposite effect. Eventually he’d given up, and thrown himself into a vigorous regime of childcare, leaving him little time for such pleasantries as being glowered at. And although Braxiatel had warned her it wouldn’t make much difference to how she felt, she was itching for Kardom’s body to be dispatched. To get it all behind her. At least Braxiatel had eventually conceded, with a grin, that the idea of it being the work of an all-powerful race of semi-divine time travellers was absurd. ‘After all,’ he’d said, ‘what’re the odds?’

As well as taking samples from the manuscripts, the medics and coroner had been keen to slice poor Kardom into little bits to see just

what the poison had done to him. Which was why it was a week before the body – or what was left of it – was ready for dispatch from the Collection's spaceport. Of course, no one had bothered to tell her this until the last minute. So she was forced to duck out of a lecture — leaving her students to the important business of writing each other notes and necking on the back row of the auditorium —and pelt along to the Naismith Memorial Spaceport before she missed the embarkation.

It would have been nice to think it was a simple casket – no flowers, please – but what passed for a coffin under these circumstances was a large biohazard chamber, sealed with an array of conspicuous titanium bolts and ribbons warning anyone who might get a kick out of opening up caskets that they might as well climb inside and lock the lid behind them. Bernice watched it being loaded onto the small transport that would carry it up to the main shipping lines, trying to catch her breath from behind two thick inches of plasteen in the safety of the construction works' observation balcony.

So this was it. Her final chance to apologise for a death she'd caused, and had had no opportunity to prevent, of a man she didn't even know. Had Kardom been religious? She offered up a silent prayer to whatever gods he might have believed in, just on the off chance. Then she whispered 'sorry', for good measure. Braxiatel had been right: it didn't make her feel better. But that was no reason not to do it – not doing it would have made her feel worse. And even that wasn't much consolation.

Watching the transport arc into the grey November sky with all the grace of a well-aimed brick, Bernice blinked to clear the neon contrails its thrusters had left across her vision. It was at this point that she became aware of another face, reflected in the plasteen, doing exactly the same thing. A small, bearded man, tracking the transport as it flared briefly and faded into the upper atmosphere, taking the all-too mortal remains of Doctor Kardom with it. Benny felt an odd sense of recognition. Perhaps she had seen him at a seminar, or something. Something about his eyes...

'Excuse me,' she said, turning suddenly, 'Do I know you at all?'

The man blinked again, startled, and frowned. 'Er, no,' he said. 'No, I'm afraid not.' He glanced round at the balcony's exit, then back at her, smiling weakly. Clearly a flight risk, Benny thought, and extended her arm before he bolted.

'Professor Bernice Summerfield, Mr...?'

'Hok,' he replied, after a pause. 'Aljermain Hok.' Benny grasped his sweaty palm and shook it. Well, flapped it, anyway – it was definitely a one-sided process. He obviously didn't want to be disturbed. Benny didn't feel much up to disturbing, for that matter. Better get this over

with.

‘Are you here for Dr Kardom?’ she blurted. ‘Only it’s either that, or you’re a transport spotter, and you don’t seem the type.’ (This was, Bernice had to admit, stretching the bounds of politesse somewhat. He seemed exactly the type, but you never know.)

Flummoxed, Hok made like a goldfish, looking as though he’d rather stand there with his palm sweating into Bernice’s all day than say yes. Eventually Benny, already feeling foolish, was forced to raise an eyebrow. He gave up.

‘Yes,’ he replied finally. ‘I knew him vaguely. We bumped into each other on lecture tours occasionally. You know how it is, I’m sure.’

Bernice let go of his arm, which flopped limply to his side. ‘Oh,’ she said, disappointed and not much caring whether it showed. ‘I didn’t know him at all.’ Not fancying explaining to this chap about her being the killer of his vague acquaintance, she added, ‘I just thought someone should say goodbye.’

‘Well,’ he replied gently, looking up into the cold, grey expanse of sky, ‘I suppose that makes two of us. Do you happen to know how he died? The report on the netboard didn’t mention.’

Benny turned back to the window, following his gaze, and told him about the manuscript and the polytoxin. Again, she saw his eyes reflected there, hovering disembodied over the spaceport. And next to them, her own. And that was when she knew she wasn’t alone.

She wasn’t the only one who thought they’d killed Dr Kardom.

‘Joseph!’ she barked, as she shouldered the door of her apartment open.

‘Yes, Professor?’

‘Joseph, what can you tell me about... Where’s Peter?’

‘He is with Mr Kane, Professor. Mr Kane mentioned an oncoming storm he was anxious to avoid, and took Peter for what he promised would be an extended walk.’

‘Oh. Right. That figures. Why,’ she continued, flopping down onto the sofa, ‘have you got a feather duster sticking out of you?’

‘I am dusting, Professor.’

‘Jolly good. You should keep it, it suits you. Joseph, I need you to look into something for me. What can you tell me about an Aljerman Hok?’

‘Just one moment, please, Professor.’ Joseph bobbed for a second, establishing a link with the Collection’s central hub. ‘Hok, Aljerman,’ he said. ‘Noted illusionist and escape artist of the Mars colonies. Born 2487, died 2562. Hok was best known for his infamous trouser-eating act, in which members of the audience would volunteer to have their trousers ingested by Hok on stage, only for him to then...’

‘No, I’m talking about someone on the Collection now. I just left him at the spaceport, and at no point did he express an interest in eating my trousers.’

‘Excuse me, Professor. Checking.’ Bob. Weave. ‘There are no individuals currently on the Collection by that name. Moreover, the one extant reference to Hok, Aljerman on the GNDB refers to a three-year-old infant on Blessidore Prime.’

‘Well, it wasn’t him...’

‘Her, Professor.’

‘...wasn’t her either. How odd. Next time I randomly accost some perfect stranger, I’m going to ask for some ID.’

There would be security footage at the spaceport, of course, but getting hold of that would be a question of filling in forms, explaining things to Brax – or worse, Ms Jones. On the other hand...

‘Joseph, are you on speaking terms with other AIs? I mean, if I wanted to know whether the recently deceased Dr Kardom had bumped into an old friend, or something, would you be able to find out?’

Bob. Weave. Beep.

Thirty seconds later, Bernice was squinting at her viewscreen. She rather suspected there ought to be security protocols for this sort of thing, but either it had never occurred to Braxiatel to put some in place — which seemed unlikely — or they didn’t apply to her. Security footage on the Collection was notoriously patchy, especially since the Occupation had ended, when the Killorans had taken vicious delight in wrecking what was left of the Axis’ camera network. But the porters were everywhere. They saw everything. And, presumably so they could get together for a drink and have a good old chuckle over amusing incidents, or something, quite a bit of their visual data was backed up. After a lengthy conversation featuring a certain amount of ethical debate with his colleagues, lasting whole milliseconds, Joseph had come up trumps.

So it was that Benny settled down to watch a robot waiter’s-eye-view of one of the Collection’s daintier bars, the Agamemnon, not far from the library. It was the sort of place where lecturers and academics went of an evening to boast about their latest intellectual accomplishments, so actual students avoided it like the plague. As did Benny and Jason, for that matter. But she knew the place well enough to see that the waiter in question, serial reference jroo3C9584 — Junior to his friends — was nipping around picking up glasses from the eastern seating section. According to Joseph, this was two weeks ago last Thursday. The visuals were giddy, lurching from side to side as Junior performed handbrake turns around tables and patrons, neatly intercepting empty glasses and depositing them on the bar. The

soundtrack was the usual hubbub of academic and alcoholic stimulation, presented in full surround sound. It was, Benny thought, rather better than being there.

Having cleared this section of glasses, the waiter suddenly extended his legs, so that his head now occupied a corner of the ceiling, spinning about, watching the action below.

‘What’s he doing?’ Benny asked Joseph, who was bobbing about with an air of extraordinary self-satisfaction.

‘Awaiting an optimum level of further empty glasses for collection path, Professor.’

‘Of course. Joseph, this is perfect. I could kiss you.’

Directly below Junior, sitting at a table arrayed with papers and scribbling furiously in a notebook, was a saurian in a nicely tailored linen suit. From Junior’s position, Benny could only see the back of Kardom’s scaly green head, jerking from note to note, cross-checking his work over a mineral water.

‘Good grief,’ Benny realised, ‘the library’s closed for the night, so he’s just moved to the bar next door to continue his work. I thought I was the only one who did that.’

‘Kardom!’ came a muffled voice from the viewscreen, making Benny jump.

And there he was. The little bearded man from the spaceport, moving over from the bar, drink in hand, towards Kardom’s table.

‘That’s him!’ Benny shouted. ‘That’s Aljermain Hok! Or, rather, it isn’t. Joseph, who’s that?’

‘Checking, Professor.’

Joseph struck up another conversation with Junior who, it turned out, was on a very friendly basis with a couple of the Agamemnon’s tills. Who, in turn, had had this bearded character’s credit strip swiped through them quite a few times on the night in question.

Back on the viewscreen, Kardom looked up at the approaching beardie and for the first time Benny got a good look at the saurian’s face. It was a curious sensation. She had only ever seen him being dead before, and the whole living, breathing, moving thing was clearly working much better for him.

Especially when he picked up his mineral water and threw it directly at...

‘Professor Rand Gemenio, Professor. A celebrated scientific thinker and debunker of myths, best known for his systematic proofs of the non-relevance of applied metaphysics.’

But Benny wasn’t listening. She had paused the image on the viewscreen, and was running it forward and back, forward and back, watching the arc of mineral water as it flew across the bar, and Junior flew down to intercept the now-empty glass tumbling through the air.

‘What,’ she asked Jospeh, ‘is that?’

‘The gentlemen are engaged in some sort of disagreement, Professor.’

‘I can see that,’ Benny sighed. ‘I mean, what,’ and she followed the arc of water across the viewscreen with her finger, ‘is that?’

Joseph had no idea.

Benny and Jason were dressed in rubber. Well, actually, it wasn’t rubber, but some fantastically advanced sort of bonded plastic polymerase stuff that absolutely prevented your skin from breathing at all. But it felt like rubber, and did a bang-up job of protecting the wearer from, say, bioengineered topo-fractal polytoxins. Under normal circumstances, Jason might have been up for a spot of rubber and asphyxiation, but the Collection stacks weren’t really his idea of location, location, location. Nor was near-total darkness his idea of mood lighting. Especially crouched down behind a conspicuously overloaded bookshelf with no room to move his elbows without a priceless piece of historical nonsense chafing them. They’d been squatting like this for hours, and he was beginning to get cramp. He shifted his big toe ever so slightly. Rubber squeaked.

‘Shhhh!’ said Benny.

‘I was shhhhed!’ he hissed. ‘Despite having incipient cramp on the entire left-hand side of my body, so that when I stand up all my muscles will simultaneously spasm and prolapse out of my arse, I was shhning for Britain! I was the very epitome of shh...’

‘Will you be quiet? I knew I should have brought Adrian.’

‘What the hell am I doing here anyway?’

‘I needed some muscle.’

‘You should have brought Adrian.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Bernice smiled behind her plasteen facemask. ‘Can you imagine Adrian in rubber?’

‘Point,’ whispered Jason, trying not to giggle.

‘Besides, I wanted to leave Peter with a responsible adult.’

Jason stopped giggling.

‘Shhhh!’ said Benny.

‘Oh, now, don’t start that again –’

‘No, I mean “Shhh, someone’s coming!”’

Jason shhhed.

Beyond the desks, still festooned with manuscripts and biohazard tape, the research centre’s door cracked open. Peering over a complete set of the 1898-1902 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Benny could dimly make out a male figure creeping into the room, almost a parody of someone up to no good. Suddenly, the door swung silently shut behind him of its own accord.

Brushing a small panel on the side of her biohaz helmet, Benny activated its IR vision and the room lit up in a psychedelic cacophony of neon colour.

There, outlined in a shifting, glowing aura of pink and white, was the short, bearded figure of Rand Gemenio, his hand limply outstretched towards the manuscripts, still vacuum packed after their return from the lab. As Benny and Jason watched, he raised his arm, as though lifting some invisible weight, and the plastic wrapping around the books exploded away from them, shredding itself in the air and floating to the ground like blossom. Then the texts themselves took off, hovering unsupported, their covers drifting open, pages splaying out...

‘Blimey,’ said Jason, rather loudly. ‘Now there’s a trick.’

The books fell crashing back to the desk as Benny remotely activated the research centre’s lights, and she and Jason sprang from behind their bookcase in what they both felt was a rather superbly action-packed and dramatic manner. Gemenio, panicked, managed to turn a full 360 degrees before apparently deciding running away was his best bet, only to be flattened by 97lbs of Jason Kane slamming into him at full pelt.

‘Now!’ shouted Jason, as the pair of them headed floorwards.

‘Get off me!’ squealed Gemenio, and, rather to Jason’s surprise, he did exactly that. His entire body shot up to the ceiling, knocking the wind out of him. Gemenio scrambled to his feet, and turned to face Bernice – only to discover she was armed with what looked rather like a gun, pointing directly at him.

‘Guns can’t hurt me,’ he sneered, raising his arm.

‘In that case,’ said Benny, ‘you’ve got nothing to worry about, have you?’ and fired.

Gemenio was knocked to the ground again – not by a bullet, but by the sudden impact of Jason’s 97 rubber-clad lbs landing on his head.

‘Portable localised psi-dampening field generator,’ explained Benny, keeping it firmly trained on the tangle of arms and legs on the floor. ‘After all, we wouldn’t want anyone to go telekinetically stopping our autonomic brain functions, would we, Professor Gemenio?’ She moved in close, waving the generator in his face. ‘Because that might look like a previously undiagnosed heart disorder. Or a poisoning. And there’s been a bit of a rash of those lately.’

Jason clumsily pulled himself off the bewildered Gemenio who, wincing, staggered to his feet, his head in his hands. ‘Turn that thing off!’ he demanded.

‘Not on your nelly,’ replied Bernice. ‘I saw what you did to Kardom. You killed him out of petty academic jealousy, so I hardly think you’d restrain yourself from popping my clogs given half a chance.’

‘Ha! Academic jealousy? I don’t think so, Professor Summerfield,’ spat Gemeno, evidently much happier now he’d found a favourite topic. ‘Kardom was a charlatan and a fool. He’s made a career out of peddling his superstitious Harrassi claptrap, and that manuscript of yours was simply another tool to lend academic credence to his absurd ideas!’

‘So you killed him to end his betrayal of academe? Not that you’re a nutter, or anything. So why, if it’s all nonsense, come back to destroy the manuscripts?’

‘I think,’ Gemeno sighed, ‘that you already know the answer to that, Professor. Or you wouldn’t have been here waiting for me now, would you?’

‘Got to admit,’ said Jason from the floor, rubbing his side, ‘I’d been wondering about that myself. Go on, Miss Marple, explain it all.’

‘Gemeno didn’t know about the poison until I mentioned it at the spaceport,’ Benny told him. ‘If the manuscript was poisoned, that meant there was a chance that Kardom was right: the legends of it killing those who read it were true. And you couldn’t have that, could you?’

‘No,’ admitted Gemeno, after a pause. ‘No, I couldn’t have that at all. How did you know about...’ He tapped the side of his head.

‘I found footage of Kardom throwing his drink at you in the Agamemnon. He was a good shot. Most of it hit you square in the face. It was the droplets that turned at right angles in mid-air that gave you away.’

‘Ah, of course. Instinctive reaction. Difficult to suppress. I had to force myself to let the water hit me at all. But,’ Gemeno shrugged, ‘yet another reason to hate Kardom and all he stands for. That was my best suit.’

‘You know what the irony is? You didn’t have to kill him. He would have been dead within minutes as it was. According to the medics, he was just about to turn the last page when you stopped his heart. You could have had what you wanted, and kept your hands clean...’

‘I think,’ said Jason, ‘I’ve broken a rib.’

‘Shhh!’ said Benny.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, I thought we’d finished with the explana... What the hell’s that?!’

Benny glanced back at Gemeno, to see a shuddering, stuttering paroxysm of a man in his place. His entire body was vibrating soundlessly, a quivering blur inside which she could just make out the form of Gemeno, his face set in a rictus of determination. She became aware that the psi-dampener was starting to feel curiously warm in her hands.

‘Goddess,’ she whispered, ‘his psi rating must be off the scale...

Jason! Knock him out!’

‘I hate to be difficult at what is obviously a very tense juncture,’ came a voice from the floor, ‘but I’m pretty sure I mentioned something about a broken rib? Besides, if you think I’m going anywhere near that...’

Jason was cut off by the sound of a voice. It echoed around the room, rebounding from the walls, resonating inside Benny’s skull. It was a low, guttural sound, seemingly dredged up from the deepest pits of contempt the human psyche has to offer, making their blood run cold.

‘Your pathetic trinket cannot stop me,’ it growled. ‘Nothing can stand against the might of...’

It was at this point that Gemenó’s head exploded in a shower of crimson, somewhat stunting his oratorical style.

‘Pathetic trinket?’ Benny demanded as the headless body of Rand Gemenó flopped to the floor with a wet splat. ‘How’s that for a pathetic trinket?’

‘Wow,’ said Jason Kane as the pulpy remains of a corpus collosum slid down his faceshield. ‘I thought I was the only one you could make feel like that.’

‘It’s not just that I’m not responsible for Kardom’s death anymore,’ Benny cheerfully explained to Braxiatel over tea and crumpets. ‘It means his death wasn’t normal. He wasn’t killed by a bioengineered polytoxin created by a race of omnipotent superbeings who may, or may not, exist, and planted on an ancient manuscript that I found, after all. And that means...’

‘That means you can still hope that, one day, things will go back to normal,’ mused Braxiatel, absent-mindedly dunking a crumpet in his teacup.

‘Well, yeah. But I’m not holding my breath.’

Reparation

By Gregg Smith

Benny stood on the portico of the Grand Trianon and gazed at an undulating glow to the north. She turned and walked through the colonnade, gazing at the same undulating glow to the south.

Braxiatel held a party in the Mansionhouse every two weeks, and had done since the Occupation ended. Everyone was invited. They celebrated the handiest festival, and that another fortnight had passed uneventfully. The last had marked Halloween, the next was scheduled for Levi-Strauss Day, and tonight's was in honour of Tava'ak, the Martian festival of storms. Benny helped Hass prepare the rockfires and advised the kitchens on the appropriate items for the buffet, but excused herself from the celebration itself.

She shivered and sipped her Tom Collins. Well into Michelmas and the nights were noticeably chilly. The Axis had maintained a regular, moderate temperature during the Occupation, but Braxiatel had put the seasons back.

She leant against the nearest column; the veined pink marble was warm. After a moment, she realised Braxiatel was standing behind her. He cleared his throat.

'It's not like you to miss a party. Drinking alone?'

'Not any more.'

'You're worried about Jason.'

'Of course I'm worried. This supply run was meant to take three days. He's been gone two weeks.'

'Well, I've got good news. I've spoken to Earth's envoy in Tega, General Krasilov. It seems Jason was arrested for collaborating with the Axis. One of his contacts turned him in. There have been warrants out for him for months. But I've explained what happened and they've agreed to let him go.'

'Oh thank the Goddess.' Benny stretched her neck and flexed her shoulders, releasing twelve days' worth of tension.

'No, thank me.'

'Thank you.'

'But there's no need. I'm just glad it's a weight off your mind. He'll be back tomorrow afternoon.'

'I'll miss him, then.' Her face fell. 'And I'm going to be gone for a fortnight.'

'Actually, I've given it much thought, and I don't really think you need to go to Viveka.'

‘What?’

‘You’ve got your students, and Peter, and returning three monuments and a few assorted items doesn’t really need an archaeologist. I’m putting Bev in charge.’

Benny laughed for a few moments, then stopped abruptly.

‘You’re not joking, are you?’

‘She’s quite capable of managing this project.’

‘Oh, come on. She doesn’t know anything about Vivekan history. Flying us there is one thing, but this needs someone with experience in art history.’

‘The Vivekans have their own people. The chap in charge of their museum is Emeritus Professor of Cultural Resources with the Interplanetary Collegiate. These are their pieces, and they know what to do with them. I really don’t think you’re needed. You’re forte is field archaeology, not restoration.’

‘And Bev’s is stealing things, not returning them.’

‘Then, this should be valuable experience for her. You wanted these pieces returned, and I accept that. Somehow we’ve got to make reparations for what the Axis did.’

‘Oh don’t be silly. We’re just putting things back the way they were before the Axis came.’

‘We both know a little of Bev’s background. She wants to make amends for that. Sincerely, I’m sure. Doesn’t the synchronicity appeal to you?’

‘And she’s not exactly one of life’s natural managers. This is far too important. You’ve dragged your feet over this, and now you’re palming them off with your secretary. She can’t answer their questions, reassure them. She’s got no capacity for dealing with this situation.’

‘She’s learnt an awful lot. And she’s very keen. She has a hidden diplomatic streak.’

‘Well hidden.’

‘I’ve made up my mind about this. There’s nobody else to take your research group, and I haven’t got the time to look after them myself. Besides, you’ll have more time to work on your new book. And you do want to see Jason, don’t you?’

‘But... but Bev? What does she even know about it all?’

Everyone within the academy accepts that even the most analytical and omnivorous history and archaeology are not entirely divorced from erroneous orthodoxy and parochial self-delusion. But those outside the academy continue to believe in the cultural and processual paradigms, abandoned by professionals long ago. Analytical archaeologists spend much of their time considering the contexts of their subjects and of

themselves, and the complexities of cultural development. But history has an audience, and most of that audience still wants to see the happy progress of civilisation and is exclusively interested in their own cultural heritage. The way to change this is by forcing the audience to confront its own cultural view. Archaeologists in the field are better placed to do this.

Cultural forces are tacitly endorsed by current analytical and presentational methods, even methods employed to counteract those cultural forces. But cultural forces can be overwhelmed by exposure to the raw mess of history. It is through wider involvement in field archaeology that the gulf between students and consumers of history can be bridged, that society as a whole can be exposed to the reality of the past.

(from Bernice Summerfield: Practical Archaeology [2604/5, unpublished manuscript], Chapter 1 – Archaeology on the Edge)

The freighter landed in Viveka's capital, Brackton, almost an hour ahead of schedule. Bev, when Adrian asked, explained the schedule had been agreed when they thought Benny was leading the trip. But they had left the Collection exactly on time. No last-minute emergencies, no detours en route, no being attacked or shot-down by monsters just happening to cross their path.

Alongside Bev and Adrian, there were three Killorans on the trip: Perry Cleese and Joe Novak – who, like Adrian, had named themselves after great European military leaders; and Megan Carter – who had chosen her name in honour of the woman who invented Habeas Corpus and took a stand against absolute monarchy. Perry was Adrian's best stonemason; Megan and Joe were skilled labour and great company. Bev was relieved none of the academic staff were coming along, and reassured to have the muscle in case things did turn nasty – as the academics had all insisted would happen upon hearing Braxiatel's PA was leading the operation.

Adrian poked his head out of the airlock. At the bottom of the gangway stood four figures. Troops in grey Earth-issue uniforms were dotted around the landing park, right up to a high fence about half a mile away.

'Project manager,' Bev said from behind him. He stepped aside as she squeezed past, then he followed her down the gangway. A man in denim and tweed stepped up to greet them. He was chubby and about five foot ten, a shade shorter than Bev. He had dark hair and a beard, both cropped and flecked with grey.

'Welcome to Viveka. Professor Warren Carroll, Chief Curator and Acting Director of the Planetary Museum.'

'My name's Tarrant. I'm Mr Braxiatel's personal representative.'

'Sikander Shama, the Government's Heritage Secretary,' Carroll indicated the man beside him

‘Delighted,’ Shama bowed. He was in his fifties and completely bald.

‘President Silver sends her warmest regards and looks forward to meeting you at the unveiling ceremony. We are all very pleased to have these important works returned to their proper home. This is my deputy, Dorom Desh.’ He indicated an Erinancean in a grey toga behind him.

The Erin was just under five foot tall. He had tanned skin, large ears and small, black eyes. His snout protruded up from his chin, interrupted by his thin mouth, then sloped back to the top of his head. Short brown spikes covered the long top of his head, his back and shoulders. His toga was tied across his chest. He produced a datapad from beneath its folds and typed notes as Bev explained storage procedures. On each hand he had four long fingers; a thumb extruded from the base of his palm.

Bev introduced Adrian then moved forward as he introduced his team.

Beyond Desh stood a woman in grey. She was about thirty-five, slightly shorter than Bev, with black hair and dark glasses. Her tunic was fastened to the throat, silver Earth emblems on her left breast and broad shoulders. On her left collar were two triangles and two half-moons with their curves touching, the silver insignia of Earth’s Mechanised Diplomatic Corps; on her right was a black star. Bev recognised the symbol.

‘Major?’

‘Call me Helen, Miss Tarrant.’

‘Bev,’ said Bev. ‘Are you a fan of history, Helen?’

‘I’m chief adjutant to General Lyons, Earth’s Special Envoy in this sector. He assigned a detachment to look after things here. I’m overseeing security.’

Viveka’s civil guard didn’t emerge from the Occupation in very good shape.

‘We’re here to help as best we can.’ She noticed Bev’s raised eyebrows. ‘Our presence here in no way compromises the independence of the Vivekan government.’ She looked over her shoulder at the gates. ‘Besides, with the natives getting restless it’s best to have a purely human team. No conflict of interests.’

‘Earth sent forces just for this?’

‘Earth Central has taken a keen interest in the return of these important artefacts to their home.’

Adrian led the group to the rear of the ship. Bev sidled up next to him as they watched the crates being offloaded.

As they approached the perimeter fence, Bev got a better look at the crowd. It was split in two by the entrance road. One crowd was

wholly human: a few shouting angrily at the other crowd, most subdued and touristy. Some wore T-shirts with pictures of the sculptures on.

The other crowd was mostly Erinancean, with a few humans and a couple of other species. An Erin in baggy trousers and a white jacket jumped into the road; two Earth troopers ran towards him.

‘Problems?’ asked Bev.

‘Some of the aboriginal community are unhappy about the monuments,’ said Carroll. ‘It’s a complex issue – bad memories of the early colonial period.’

‘It was a long time ago,’ Shama interjected. ‘These protestors are a vocal minority.’

‘A few militants,’ added Desh.

‘It’s a passing frenzy.’

‘To be honest, we’d hoped to avoid anything like this,’ Carroll continued.

‘There have been other protests since the Occupation. The Axis re-engendered some long-dead divisions. I did mention the possibility to Mr Braxiatel, but he went ahead and announced the return over IP. Rather unfortunate.’

‘And it wasn’t very tactful of him to mention how important they’d been to the Fifth Axis,’ added Shama. That stirred up some unpleasant feelings.’

‘I’m sorry about that,’ said Bev. ‘Our PR man died last year. Brax hasn’t been able to recruit a proper replacement yet.’

‘Can’t be helped,’ said Carroll lightly. ‘Besides, it’s not like you could just sneak the things in. You’re not art thieves.’ He laughed and Bev smiled tightly.

The vehicle passed through the gates. Shama pointed at a particular Erinancean with a white beard and a hooded orange cloak, standing at the head of the protest.

‘That’s Lormar Tsyte. He fought in the resistance against the Axis. Quite a hero. We were going to build a statue to him, until he joined the nativist campaign after the Occupation. He’s running in the presidential elections next year. I just don’t understand why they have to create all this trouble.’

The first week was uneventful. There was a small picket in front of the museum’s steel facade each day, but Bev tried not to let it worry her. Having experienced Axis terror, Carroll and his staff were prepared for the worst and were actually quite relieved by the state of the commodities Bev brought to them.

The artefacts the Axis had removed included a few spacesuits from the original crew; the remains of the original flight controls of the

explorer St Paul (the intact colony ship, Ocean of Existence, was a separate site); various desiccated examples of early twenty-second-century Earth culture. The pride of the lot was the three free-standing sculptures. Bev worked with museum staff on unpacking, checking, labelling and displaying the more minor artefacts, whilst the Killorans restored the great stone monuments.

The statues were twice as high as Bev and showed the pilots of the St Paul, Commander David Pretty and Lieutenant Kara Vinda, greeting an unidentified, stereotypical Erinancean. They were amongst the earliest monumental art produced by humans outside the solar system. The Axis tore all three from their metal pedestal and shipped them to the Braxiatel Collection, displaying the humans in the Mansionhouse and using the Erin for target practice in one of the stables. The most damage had been done to the exposed features on the face and upper back.

The two humans had been heroes in the Axis canon: after the colony ship had arrived in 2124, Pretty led explorations to Mu Cassiopeia and Alrakis, Vinda to Tega and Altair. Anson had assembled a small gallery of icons and records of those two pioneers. The three had been in a smaller chamber before the Axis invasion, but were now the focus of a heritage display in the main gallery. They were the focus of the protests, too.

The two human statues had been reerected with no trouble, slight damage easily filled in. The Erin had been laboriously pieced back together. Bev was stunned by Perry's work – the fragments were joined invisibly, all trace of the Axis vandalism gone. He worked from the museum's detailed records, growing individual sections of stone in a polymorphic generator to replace those that had been lost or shattered beyond repair.

Bev tried socialising with the natives, but Carroll was always working and the curators were very cliquey, so she ended up drinking with the Killorans in their hotel's bar. Not that she was complaining. All the extra research invitations Braxiatel had issued just meant more work, and she was glad to get away from academics for a while.

Adrian had been paying more attention to the protests, and raised the matter with Bev one evening when they were alone.

'Brax told me I'd like Viveka. Said he was here for the last Periastron festival. I checked. That was two-hundred and thirty-five years ago.'

'Maybe he meant the next one.'

Adrian frowned at her.

'Never mind,' she smiled.

'But he didn't mention any of this. I counted sixty protestors this

morning, and almost a hundred tonight.'

Bev didn't respond.

'These statues are really quite amazing,' he went on. 'I wish I'd taken Peter to see them while I had the chance.'

'They aren't going anywhere else,' said Bev. 'I'm sure you can bring him here one day. When he's old enough to get something out of it.'

'He's very bright for his age,' said Adrian proudly.

'There's a surprise.'

'He's going to be four in a couple of months. I don't know what to get him. I don't think Benny would be happy if I got him something too Killoran.'

'I'm sure you're wrong. But surely what matters is whether Peter likes it.'

'Of course.'

'It's no good, Adrian. She isn't interested. She has Jason.'

'We'll see.' He looked quickly away from her. 'But they are amazing. The statues. The quality of the micro-lasering is peerless.'

'I know,' Bev replied, keen to change the subject too. 'The materials, the technique, the period: they're unique. Do you know how much they're worth? I still can't believe Brax has just given them back.'

'Bev!' Adrian growled, shocked. 'These aren't just bits of art. Artefacts like these bring history to life. I learnt your race's history from text books. But it didn't seem real to me until I came to the Collection and got to see people and things from that history. And that process changed the way I felt about history. Putting faces to the names, seeing the maps and images of empires and buildings.'

'They're not an accurate representation of the past, you know?' said Bev.

'I've been reading up – don't pull that face, I can hold my own with the Bernice Summerfields. The monument is an abstract, idealised idea of first contact, which really took place by radio. Pretty and Vinda were in the greeting party, but wouldn't have worn their flight suits. And the Erinancean is in clothes from the wrong period and the wrong part of the planet. But it isn't just about the historical event. Why do you think they've moved these statues to such a position of prominence?'

Adrian thought for a moment. 'Because the Axis stole them?'

'This big heritage display, the re-opening: They're looking for something to rally to. The statues are heroes for everyone to look up to, take pride in. A way to restore their sense of community.'

'The Collection is doing fine without that.'

'Why do you think Brax keeps having these parties? And all these new research students he's invited?'

Adrian chewed his lip. 'So, maybe Benny's only back with Jason

because...'

'Give it up,' Bev interrupted.

'If they want heroes, why not the resistance?'

'Too recent. Too close to the Axis. They thought this would be less divisive, less painful.'

'I don't think they thought it through at all.'

'You can make heroes out of real people, but you can't make everyone ignore their faults and complexities. And you shouldn't try to,' she added as Adrian raised his eyebrows. 'Naming yourself after a Roman emperor doesn't count, of course.'

'I'm honouring his achievements.'

'That's what the Vivekans are doing. The problem is that just as Pretty and Veda serve as heroes for the humans, they're villains to the Erinanceans. As the Erins see it, they brought oppression, loss of culture, lack of self-determination.'

'They've got a point. Even on worlds where the indigenous population wasn't oppressed, explorers and traders disseminated Earth culture as a universal standard with no regard for local sensibilities and traditions. It happened on my world.'

'But you can't blame all humans for that. That was a long time ago.'

'And what was the Fifth Axis? A bad dream? I don't mean to insult your people...'

'They're not my people. I was born in a different time and a different galaxy.'

'What?'

'Long story.'

They sat in silence for a while, sipping their drinks, then Adrian leant forward and put his huge hands on Bev's.

'I think we should leave. We shouldn't be part of this.'

'We've still got work to do.'

'If something happens, I don't want you to risk your life for these things.'

'Nobody's risking their life, Adrian.'

Total objectivity isn't only impossible; it isn't desirable, either. There's something squalid in being able to talk about a million deaths as if they're just a fact of history, just part of a process. An account of Earth's breathtaking bureaucratic and technical achievements in the colonisation of other worlds is worthless if it doesn't tackle the morality of the forced migration of ten billion people. But until self-subjective awareness is universal, a certain sterility is necessary. The best course of action in the short term may be to present evidence of the past without analysis and without a recreated setting, displaying findings exactly as they appear in the field.

The protest grew in the second week, as the re-opening of the museum neared and the militants organised a march for the day before it.

Towards the end of the week, the pickets were joined by a counter-protest.

On her eleventh morning on Viveka, Bev found herself having to negotiate the narrow channel between two screaming crowds. Both sides had accused the other of being like the Fifth Axis, of callous aggression and obsession over the relics from the past. There was violence later that day, as the local police and the Earth troops failed to keep the two sides apart.

On day thirteen, the day before the march, Lormar Tsyte was invited into the museum. He watched for ten minutes in the main gallery, as Adrian and Perry assembled a safety cradle around the statue of Pretty and then hoisted it onto the pedestal with gravity beams. Then he joined Shama and Carroll in the director's office.

Bev arrived outside the office some minutes later from the museum archives, where she had checked data on the exact positioning of the statues in relation to each other. She heard raised voices inside.

'You're celebrating the destruction of our ancestors.' Tsyte's voice was measured but it carried.

'No,' said Carroll. 'The statues symbolise friendly relations. We want to celebrate the unity between our two species.'

'There was no campaign against these statues before,' said Shama.

'These symbols have become more important,' said Tsyte. 'For both our people. But for different reasons.'

'So the Axis managed to undo centuries of reconciliation in just a few months?'

'These problems are fundamental.'

'And they'll never be resolved?'

'I hope, one day.'

'You're trying to exploit what happened, ride the suffering of your own people into power. This is about politics, not society.'

Bev heard Tsyte leap from his chair.

'How dare you?'

'We're working on reconstructing the aboriginal pieces that were damaged,' said Warren desperately.

'But yours first, of course. And who asked you to display our heritage – what was left of it after you came – in your museum?'

'The museum is for all citizens of Viveka,' said Shama.

'Viveka? Our world was called Tsanit. You called it Viveka. So we must call it Viveka. We must use your language to talk about our past. No. I must put my people first now.' Tsyte opened the door, pausing

just inside. 'Maybe if your reconstruction showed your pioneers killing my people, that would be fair.'

'But that wasn't what happened,' said Shama. 'Pretty and Vinda were never involved in the colonisation process. And the first case of a human killing an Erinancean didn't happen until 2121.'

'Well, why don't you build a statue of that?'

Warren followed Tsyte out, pleading with him to stay.

Shama walked to the door and Bev ensured he clocked the look she was giving him. 'He's got a point.'

'You think we should change the statues to suit Tsyte?' Shama asked.

'No. But I think history should tell the whole truth.'

We spoke to some of the counter-protestors:

All I'm saying is, maybe the Axis were right about some things.

Bev switched off the TV and put on her jacket. The work was done. She and the others were to leave in two days – they were staying on for the ceremony, though none of them were keen.

She left her hotel and headed towards the museum. After checking in with security she looked in on Adrian and Perry, busy packing up their equipment, then walked to the director's office. Warren was practising his speech.

'On the thirtieth of April, twenty-one-nineteen, the hyperspace ship St Paul landed on the fourth planet of the Eta Cassiopeia system. Eta Cassiopeia, or Achird, was the first human outpost in this sector. Within three years it was the terminal for one of the major hyperspace trade routes from Earth, and the colony, named Viveka, a thriving new world. The men and women who built that world...' he stopped for a moment. 'Viveka, a thriving community. The men and women who built this new community, were... Oh, hello Miss Tarrant.'

'Evening, Professor. Sorry to interrupt.'

'No, no. I hope you'll join us tomorrow night.'

She didn't answer.

'Earth's Envoy is coming. And President Silver. She's been amazing, picking up the pieces. Her security people wanted to evacuate her during the invasion. She wouldn't go, and the Axis had her tortured...'

'Well, your world wasn't alone,' said Bev, flatly. They showed the protest on the news.'

'I didn't want to see.'

'Some reports said a million marched to the city centre. Lormar Tsyte spoke for half an hour.'

'Really? He was mayor of Brackton before the Axis took over, you know? I voted for him.' He shook his head. 'We've lived together peacefully for four centuries. But the Axis changed everything.'

He took off his glasses and put them on the desk before going on.

‘Kelly died trying to defend the aboriginal collection from the Axis. Kelly Suvani: she was the museum’s director before. She was very good, best boss I’ve ever had.’ He shook his head. ‘They destroyed... so much. Hundreds of artefacts, some dating back six thousand years. We managed to hide some of the most important pieces. A drop in a very deep ocean. There was a vigil. In the camps where the Axis had put all the Erins. Word got round quickly. I heard that a hundred thousand of them lined the fences, stood there for an hour, just repeating Kelly’s name over and over again, until the guards started shooting. How many are marching right now?’

‘Like you said, the Axis changed everything.’

‘Yes. No. Not really. Maybe it wasn’t a big issue before because everyone forgot about them. The sculptures. Forgot they were here, forgot who they were. But it was never really resolved.’

Bev sighed. ‘Regardless of whether the Axis brought these problems,’ she said, ‘or whether they’ve been waiting under the surface for three hundred years, I’m sure they aren’t insurmountable. That’s why we’re here. To learn history’s lessons.’

‘History’s lessons? Five hundred years ago, the indigenous culture was split into warring, industrialised nations. Just like Earth had been, a few centuries before that. Then two thousand heavily armed humans landed, picked a nation to do business with and set about creating a safe zone. Half a million colonists reinforced them five years later, and that’s when things really kicked off. They exterminated whole cities, enslaved an entire culture. My ancestors did that. My people. It was ninety years before the Erins were free. By that time they were a minority on their own world.’ He shook his head. ‘What can we learn from that?’

He put his glasses back on.

‘That’s not the whole picture,’ he continued. ‘The pioneers were creators and explorers, too. Not like the Axis. They really did want to build a better world than Earth. The early colonists saw the Erins making all the same mistakes that had been made on Earth, tried to stop it. Once they’d started policing the native population and telling them what to do, things got out of hand.

‘But they did great things, built so much. If it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t be here. We need... the human population needs to remember where it came from, why it’s here. We need something to bring us back together. We suffered too.

‘We should celebrate the best our ancestors did. And forget the worst.’

‘No,’ said Bev. ‘You shouldn’t forget anything. You can’t get away with a few generalisations and guesses when you’re staring the past in

the face. Maybe you can forget, or want to forget, but others can't. Things happened and you can't change that. That's what this is all about. Those statues mean so much because of the events that produced them, that led to those particular images. I know the Axis tore this society apart. I've been through that too. But this isn't the way to repair the damage.'

Little more than a hundred Erinanceans broke from the march, through the cordons and towards the museum. Tsyte was one of them.

Almost all the MDC troops had been assigned to patrol the spaceport ahead of General Lyons' arrival. The major would later describe it as an administrative error. The few left guarding the main entrance to the museum were easily overwhelmed, sustaining only light injuries. They didn't fire on the crowd, and everyone was thankful for that. The museum's security guards put up more of a struggle, two ending up in hospital, but to no avail.

Adrian and Perry made a stand at the narrow entrance to the main gallery, towering over the mob. Perry hauled the first two back and held off six more with his powerful arms. Adrian knocked four or five to the ground with a casual sweep of his left arm and growled at the rest. The crowd backed off for a moment, but Tsyte pushed his way to the front.

'Are you going to kill us?' he asked, pointing at Adrian. 'Finish what the Axis started? Are you going to stamp us out like they wanted to? Like they've always wanted to?'

Adrian's warrior grimace collapsed.

'I'm not... I...'

Tsyte pushed underneath Adrian's right arm and stepped around Perry. The Killorans stood back, protestors surging past, as their huge frames seemed to shrink.

One of the first vandals into the gallery held a gun taken from an Earth trooper. He fired three blasts at the statue of Kara Vinda. The first put a crack in the statue's head, the second took it off the neck and the last shattered it as it teetered and fell. The act was obviously pointless, completely nihilistic. But Bev understood why they wanted to do this.

She lunged at the gunner, knocking him backwards while pulling the gun out of his hand. She snapped the charge connectors, rendering the weapon useless. She began struggling with two of the Erins, then felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. Adrian yanked her back and away from the crowd.

He growled into her ear: 'I told you, they're not worth it.'

She pushed away from him.

There were Erins at the base of the display, grabbing at the feet of

the statues. Warren stood in the middle of them, screaming and holding his arms up. He came face to face with Tsyte and grabbed him by the shoulders but he was dragged off by other militants and thrown against the side of the pedestal. Bev pushed her way forward to help him, Adrian following her.

Tsyte raised his arms and halted the mob. He then turned to face Bev and Warren.

‘Why should your history be preserved when ours’, he thumped his chest, ‘has been destroyed twice over? The Axis enslaved us.’ He pointed at the statues. ‘So did they. The Axis killed thousands of us. Your “pioneers” killed millions! And you celebrate them?’

‘All right!’ shouted Warren. ‘What if we sent them away? No display here.’

We’ll get rid of them. But please don’t destroy them. I know... I know what it means. I do. But no matter what they mean to you, now, don’t destroy them.

What they stand for can change. If you obliterate every trace of the pioneers from our history, you’ll obliterate their victims.’ He breathed hard. ‘Please.’

The vandals looked to Tsyte for direction. He stared up at the statue of the Erin for a long time.

Pretty and Veda, and the other pioneers, were thus elevated to a new heroic pantheon: symbols of the human spirit. They were emblematic of humanity’s special destiny, imbued with the aesthetic of the explorer crossing the void and greeting the alien. This manufactured past, divorced from the context of desperation and terror that characterised humanity’s journey into space, served an important and necessary cultural function in the wake of the Axis invasion. But the reality of context precludes any pantheon. This was an attempt to use the past and particular relics of the past. It failed, and failed dramatically, because no practical consideration was given to the effect this past might have on the non-human members of the community. Awareness of the past has an inescapable effect on the present, and this was an attempt to increase awareness as part of cultural reconstruction.

But if that awareness is flawed or incomplete the effects will be negative. The simple showing of first contact itself created divisions between the two main cultures on Viveka.

(from Practical Archaeology, Chapter 5 – Just Art)

The next morning, Bev went back to her hotel at ten o’clock and dozed for an hour. Then she packed her clothes and lugged her bags down to reception, stacking them with the others’ luggage. Then she went to the museum.

Cages had been erected over the broken windows. Security had

been tightened since the previous evening, though the protests had ended.

She passed three large crates in the foyer – the three statues. Two intact, one damaged.

She found Adrian in the main gallery, sealing the last of the crates for transport. It was small, and she guessed it contained the fragments of Vinda's head.

'I guess that's that,' he said to her.

The Killorans had gone back to the hotel after the MDC troops arrived and moved the now solemn protestors out of the building. Bev had told them to pack and come back to the museum at six. Since then, they'd been preparing the statues for transport as per her instructions. Approval for Professor Carroll's recommendations had only come through at nine, and it was clear that Silver had overruled Shama after some argument, but Bev knew it was inevitable.

'Shame, really. I don't think even Perry can put this back together.' Adrian patted the crate then heaved it onto his shoulder. 'I'll see you at the ship.'

'Thanks,' she said. 'For protecting me. Thank you.' She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek.

Adrian grunted and walked out. As soon as he was out of Bev's sight, he grinned.

Bev walked from the main gallery through the staff corridors. Warren was in the director's office, preparing a damage report for the board of trustees.

She knocked on the door and he invited her in.

'Adrian's taking the statues out now.'

'Yes, I saw him earlier.'

'You can visit the Braxiatel Collection whenever you want.'

'Yes. I'm sure at some point I'll... Well. Look after them, won't you?'

'They'll be safe with us.'

'I don't doubt it. I don't hate them, you know. The Erins. I understand. They're still not equal. We've been cosmopolitan for four hundred years – but we can't yet live with our past.'

She shook his hand.

'Keep learning,' she said. 'Maybe you'll figure it out next time.'

Benny stormed into Braxiatel's office. Jason loitered outside, cradling a sleeping Peter in his arms.

'I told you she'd bugger it up.'

'We don't yet know what happened. It might not have been Bev's fault.'

'No, it's your fault.'

'You're being very unfair.'

‘You wanted it this way, didn’t you? You never wanted to send those statues back.’

‘Nonsense. I wanted these statues sent back to where they belong as much as you did. I know what they mean to the humans there, and I thought that now that Viveka’s economy and infrastructure had recovered from the invasion they’d be safe. But I didn’t realise what they meant to the Erinanceans. I think... I think that it might be better if they were back on the Collection. We shall be their custodians. At least for a while, I mean...’

‘Don’t talk to me,’ said Benny. ‘Just don’t.’

He raised his eyebrows.

‘This is my study,’ he said.

Benny growled and stormed out.

Nothing Up My Sleeve

By Richard Salter

The figure in the cape and white gloves opens the box. There is nothing inside, just darkness. She takes a cane with a brass handle and bangs it against all three interior sides.

She slams the box closed and spins it around three times. With a sweeping gesture, she turns to the audience and asks for complete silence...

‘Wow, I love all this stuff!’

‘Jason, put that down before you break something.’

Too late. The moron had already thrown a cape around his shoulders and placed a top hat on his head. All he needed to complete the look was a twirly moustache.

‘Aww, c’mon Benny. It’s fun!’ He held up a skimpy, spangly blue outfit and waved it in her face. It jangled disturbingly. ‘I think this would look great with your fishnets.’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ Benny agreed. ‘But they wouldn’t fit you.’

‘Ha, ha.’ Jason picked up a wand and began twirling it, looking disappointed when a packing crate failed to turn into a toad. ‘Where did all this come from?’

‘Brax had a friend who was into collecting magic paraphernalia. I think he was a performer as well.’

‘Had a friend?’

‘Yeah he died. Left everything to the Collection.’

‘Cool, so we get to use this stuff?’

Benny shook her head. ‘We get to catalogue and study this stuff. Not play with it.’

‘Oh go on, where’s the harm? I could put on a Christmas magic show for the kids!’

Benny had to admit it sounded tempting. It would certainly keep Peter and the other children occupied for an hour or two. But not yet. Everything needed to be recorded first before anything got lost. She pulled a straitjacket from one of the crates and briefly entertained the notion of letting Jason put it on and then taking him down to the lower levels and leaving him there for a few days.

Patience, Benny.

She lifted her crowbar and jammed it under the lid of the next crate. She wagged it back and forth, grunting with the effort, enjoying the sound of the wood creaking and the nails rending. Of all the activities she engaged in these days, wrenching the lids off packing crates was

one of the most satisfying.

Jason was now playing with a deck of cards, trying to shuffle them from one hand to another. Some help he was.

At last the lid came off, revealing a large quantity of books neatly packed inside. Benny winced as Jason dropped the deck of cards back in a nearby crate where they scattered, some of them drifting onto the floor. 'That's a lot of books.'

'Hands off, Jason,' Benny warned him, pulling out one of the volumes and examining the spine: *Card Manipulation and Misdirection*.

'Oh go on, Benny. Just let me read a few and then I'll return them, good as new.'

'No, Jason.'

'But Benny...'

Goddess, he was like a whiny child sometimes.

'Of course, Jason, go right ahead.' Braxiatel strode into the room. He wore a silk robe and a disconsolate expression. 'Poor Marlow has no use for it now.'

'Wow! Thanks!' Jason hurriedly sorted through a bunch of books, chose a few at random and then headed for the door. 'Oh, hello,' he said. There was a young woman there, hovering in the doorway. She was small and really quite pretty, with blonde shoulder-length hair and a cute button nose. Benny stood up, waiting for Braxiatel to introduce them. Jason had wasted no time. 'I'm Jason,' he said, shaking her hand.

She smiled nervously. 'Brenda,' she replied, sniffing slightly and wiping a hand under one eye.

'Brenda was Marlow's assistant,' Braxiatel explained. 'Until he, uh, well yes. She brought his collection of books and equipment to me in accordance with his wishes.'

Jason was very obviously staring at Brenda. Did he have to be so bloody obvious about it? Benny tried to suppress the urge to slap him.

The strangers arrived two days later, gliding through the reception area in long robes that swept the floor, reminding Benny uncomfortably of the Occupation. They didn't seem to be armed. Most of them were human, though it was hard to tell with their hoods up. All were the same height, slightly taller than Benny. There were only a dozen of them but they seemed like a little army. Braxiatel was there, overseeing the issuing of discs and welcoming them to the Collection. Their arrival seemed to have broken the thin man out of his recent funk – he was still suffering the public backlash following events on Viveka. Here was something he could sink his teeth into.

He brought the leader over to meet her. The man lowered his hood

and Benny caught sight of piercing eyes with deep lines beneath, etched into greyish skin.

‘Mr Stewart, this is Professor Bernice Summerfield.’ Benny shook his hand and said hello. ‘Mr Stewart is Chairman of the Brotherhood of Magicians.’

‘You’ll have to forgive me,’ Benny said, ‘I’m not familiar with your organisation.’

Mr Stewart spoke with an accent Benny couldn’t place, and his voice was surprisingly high-pitched. ‘Ah ha, well we are a union, if you like, for performing magicians. We provide registration and protection for our members and their assets, as well as, in a manner of speaking, protecting the secrets of our profession.’

‘How interesting,’ Benny was using her most polite tone. ‘Have you come to do some research?’

Mr Stewart cleared his throat. ‘We believe that a collection of artefacts has been bestowed upon Mr Braxiatel by a, shall we say, former member of the Brotherhood of Magicians. Mr Braxiatel, though highly regarded by our order, is not a member and therefore is not permitted to keep the artefacts.’

Benny folded her arms and turned to Braxiatel. ‘They’ve come to take all Marlow’s stuff away?’ she asked with irritation.

‘Now, now, Bernice.’

‘But I’ve barely scratched the surface! There’s so much left to study. Brax, you can’t let these people take it all. Marlow left them to you!’

‘You heard the man, Bernice. I’m not allowed to keep them.’

‘My apologies, Professor Summerfield, but, ahem, we really must remove all of Mr Marlow’s effects from this planetoid as quickly as possible. We must protect our secrets.’

Benny opened her mouth to protest further, but Braxiatel shot her a warning look and spoke first. ‘Perhaps, Mr Stewart, you and your colleagues would like to avail yourselves of our facilities while the Professor organises the artefacts for your inspection.’

Mr Stewart nodded. ‘That would be agreeable. We do not plan to linger though, just long enough to ensure that we have, how shall I say, everything we came for.’

Something about Stewart’s tone set Benny’s teeth on edge, but she allowed Braxiatel to steer him away. She left the reception area, muttering under her breath. When she broke this news to Jason she was going to need that straitjacket to restrain him.

Either Jason fancied himself a magician, or he fancied Brenda. Bernice couldn’t be sure which took precedence, but she had her suspicions. Her ex-husband had been spending a lot of time with Marlow’s assistant since she had arrived and no good could come of it, Benny

was sure. Brenda had insisted that she didn't know how most of the tricks were done as Marlow had adhered to the Brotherhood's code and refused to tell her more than she needed to know. But Jason was learning a lot from the books, he didn't really need any help from the pretty assistant. Yet still he spent time with her, practising the tricks, insisting to Benny that Brenda was providing him with invaluable advice on performance and showmanship. Uh huh.

When Benny explained that the Brotherhood of Magicians had arrived and why they were here, they reacted in very different ways. Jason started complaining, declaring that he wouldn't let anyone take Marlow's stuff away.

Brenda, on the other hand, had gone pale at the mention of the Brotherhood and hadn't said anything since.

'It's out of my hands, I'm afraid,' Benny said. 'Brenda, are you okay?'

The blonde girl gave a weak smile. 'Yes, thank you, Bernice, I'm fine.'

Only now did Jason realise that Brenda was upset – typical him – and now he made a big show of comforting her, putting an arm about her shoulders and guiding her to a seat. 'What's bothering you?' he asked.

Brenda sat as directed by Jason and answered the question. 'You don't know them like I do. They're more ruthless than they look. I don't think they've just come for all the books and the equipment, I think they've come for me too.'

'For you?' Benny repeated.

'They have to question me, to find out how much I know.'

'Know about what?' asked Jason.

'About magic, about how it's all done. Their secrets.'

Jason snorted. 'Give me a break. They can't take you away!'

Bernice would have given a lot to see Brenda taken as far away from the planetoid as possible, but she had to agree that the Brotherhood were not the ones to do so.

Taking on a manly, superhero pose – with his hands on his hips – Jason strutted around the room, his voice raised. 'I mean, what are they so keen to hide anyway? The tricks aren't difficult, once you get the hang of them. They're all about misdirection, misleading people and sleight of hand.'

'All subjects you're an expert in, dear,' Benny said.

Jason took it as a compliment. 'I admit the art comes naturally to me.'

'Don't let them take me away,' Brenda pleaded.

Before Jason could get there first, Benny sat down and comforted her. Jason looked affronted but returned to his macho posturing.

‘They just want to ask you some questions,’ Benny assured her. Brenda shook her head. ‘No, Bernice, you don’t understand. The Brotherhood of Magicians, well, they make people disappear.’ ‘Of course they do,’ responded Jason. ‘They’re magicians. I’ve been reading about it in some of Marlow’s books. Fascinating stuff...’ ‘No, Jason, I *mean* disappear. Permanently!’ Benny and Jason shared a look of concern. ‘It’s all right, Brenda,’ Benny told her. ‘You’re safe with us.’ Benny could have sworn that Jason actually pushed his chest out.

Mr Stewart’s skirts brushed along the corridor, creating little swirls of dust as he passed. You could have balanced half of Braxiatel’s rare plate collection on the man’s head and it wouldn’t have toppled when he moved. Benny resisted the temptation to peek beneath the hem of his robes to see if he had a little motorised trolley under there. Two more of the brotherhood followed at a respectful distance.

Braxiatel had finally decided to put up a fight when he’d got wind of the Brotherhood’s intention to take Brenda away along with Marlow’s effects.

‘That young lady has been entrusted to my care. I cannot let you leave with her.’

‘You don’t have any choice, Mr Braxiatel. She’s our property.’

‘Now wait a minute,’ Bernice protested, overtaking Mr Stewart and blocking his way. ‘She’s nobody’s property. She’s a living person.’

Mr Stewart regarded her with icy eyes. ‘Professor Summerfield, ahem, please get out of my way.’

‘I’m not moving.’

But Mr Stewart was already past her and heading off down the corridor.

Bernice blinked and spun around. His two fellows were behind him again, yet she hadn’t seen them pass either. How did they do that?

‘And we shall need to have words with Mr Kane as well,’ said Mr Stewart as he turned the corner.

‘Jason?’ said Brax, struggling to keep up. ‘What’s he done?’

‘We have reason to believe he’s been teaching himself the secrets of our trade. We’re going to need to question him as well.’

Benny couldn’t believe it. ‘This is getting ridiculous. Brax, do something!’

But Mr Stewart had already reached Jason’s room and had (somehow) opened the door, despite Braxiatel having reassured Benny earlier that their security cards had been programmed for limited access only.

The room was full of Marlow’s possessions. Playing cards were strewn about the floor. Costumes were draped over chairs and

furniture. Piles of books, metal rings, silk scarves and other bric-a-brac covered every surface including the bed. But it was a box that caught Benny's eye. It was tall and blue with wood panelling and for a moment, just for a brief second, her breath caught and her heart stopped. She soon realised it was a magic cabinet, with slots down the sides for swords to be inserted and latches on the front to open various sections of the box's front. Lying on the floor was a second cabinet, split into two pieces. One half was open and empty, the other was closed.

Mr Stewart and friends floated into the room, somehow still managing to glide gracefully despite the mess. A few cards fluttered in their wake.

'This is intolerable!' Mr Stewart fumed, his voice rising higher than usual.

'All our secrets left lying about like, like memorabilia.' The last word was spoken with such venom Benny took a step away from him. 'Where is Kane? Where is Marlow's assistant?'

At that moment, Jason arrived. 'Hello,' he said, pushing his way into the crowded room and then making a lame attempt to pick some things up.

'Please excuse the mess.'

'Where is Marlow's assistant?'

Jason folded his arms and stared defiantly at the spectre-like man. 'She's gone.'

'What?' said Benny and Mr Stewart together.

'She's gone. She's left the planetoid. She's somewhere you'll never find her.'

'I've found her,' said Braxiatel.

Jason's smug expression crumbled. He glared at Braxiatel until he noticed that the tall man had bent down and had opened half of the split cabinet with one hand. In the other he held a large bone saw, stained red with blood.

Jason and Benny leaned over to look inside the half-cabinet and recoiled in horror. Mr Stewart simply raised an eyebrow.

Inside the box was Brenda, her head, arms and torso at least. There was nothing below her waist except the trailing ends of her intestines, ragged and wet, soaked in the blood that pooled around her bisected body.

'Is... Is she dead?' Jason asked.

Benny just stared at him.

'This is a waste of time. Ahem, he's very guilty.' Jason had been spending the last half hour protesting his innocence, but Mr Stewart refused to listen. 'You were the last to see her, yes?' he reiterated. 'She

was in your rooms, who else could have got in here?’

‘You managed it,’ Benny pointed out. She was in a sour mood. Brenda’s death was gruesome enough, but Mr Stewart’s complete inability to look at the facts was beginning to grate. He was so insistent as to Jason’s guilt, Bernice found herself wondering if the Brotherhood of Magicians had killed Brenda themselves so that Braxiatel would have no choice but to let them take Jason away. All this to protect a few lousy conjuring tricks?

‘I am a master magician!’ Mr Stewart declared, as if that explained everything.

‘Nobody and nothing is leaving the Collection until we get to the bottom of this,’ Braxiatel said, his voice even but distress visible behind his eyes. Benny felt for him. He had been responsible for Brenda’s well-being after all.

‘Professor Summerfield will be in charge of the investigation. I want to know where the rest of poor Brenda is and who did this to her.’

‘There must be something in all those books.’

Jason threw down yet another volume and stood up from the packing crate he’d been perched on. ‘Benny, I’ve looked through the lot There’s nothing.’

He started pacing. ‘Disappearing volunteers, pulling rabbits out of hats, smashing watches and then magically repairing them, there’s several volumes on each. But there’s nothing on sawing a woman in half.’

‘That’s a little odd, don’t you think?’ Benny commented. ‘I’d have thought it would be a standard part of any professional magician’s repertoire.’

‘Maybe he wasn’t interested in that trick. Maybe he knew how to do it by heart. I don’t know. What’s it got to do with anything?’

She tapped her finger on the binding of the book she was holding. ‘I’m wondering if perhaps the Brotherhood removed all the relevant books while we weren’t looking.’

‘Why would they do that?’

‘So we can’t see how the trick is done, of course.’

‘You think Brenda’s death was a trick?’ Jason looked sceptical. ‘Certainly looked real enough. And the smell...’

‘Well let’s look at the facts. Nobody who lives here killed her, there’s just no motive. It must have been one of the Brotherhood.’

‘And how do we prove that?’

‘I don’t know.’ She shivered. The loading dock was always cold. ‘Were you telling Stewart the truth when you said you last saw her at the flyer pad?’

‘Yes, of course I was. She was going to hide out at the mill. It’s a

shame, she was so cute.' Benny stared daggers at him. He quickly added, 'In a cute-like-a-baby-sister way I mean.' He changed the subject. 'Maybe we should go look at the body, do an autopsy or something?'

Benny stared at him again. 'It's sort of obvious how she died, Jason.'

'Yes I know that. But we might find something suspicious. Something... else suspicious.'

Benny shrugged. Reading books was getting them nowhere but she didn't relish going anywhere near Brenda's remains again. Still, she would have to investigate the corpse eventually. 'Sure,' she said.

By the time they got to the infirmary, Brenda's body was gone.

'All things considered, I should have guessed this would happen,' Benny mused, staring at the cold slab, and the bloodstained sheet crumpled in a heap on top.

'Perhaps she just got up and walked away,' Jason suggested.

Benny wondered whether he was being deliberately stupid or if it just came naturally to him. She suspected the latter. 'Oh well,' he continued. 'No body, no murder. I'm off scot-free!'

'Not quite, my dear,' Benny replied. 'The Brotherhood is going to accuse you of taking the body so you could hamper the investigation.'

'But they're the ones who took it!'

'Well obviously. I wonder what they didn't want us to see...'

'So let me get this straight,' said Braxiatel in a tired voice. 'I asked you to find the other half of poor Brenda's body, and you ended up losing all of it?'

'There's more going on here than you realise,' Benny explained.

'You'd be amazed what I realise, Bernice.'

They stood in the administrative wing of the Mansionhouse, where Braxiatel had brought the Brotherhood of Magicians on a tour to meet some of the staff, just to keep them busy. Mr Stewart lingered in the background, steepling his bony fingers, deep in conversation with his fellow magicians.

Now he came forward, frustrating Benny's efforts to glean more information from Braxiatel. Damn him! He wouldn't leave Braxiatel alone for ten seconds.

'Do you have an, ah yes, explanation for us, Professor?' he asked silkily. He placed a cold, clammy hand on her bare forearm, sending shivers down her spine. Snap out of it, Summerfield, she told herself. It's just an intimidation technique. He's probably got ice in one pocket and grey face paint in the other.

'Professor Summerfield is still collating the evidence, Mr Stewart,' Braxiatel explained. 'She needs more time.'

'We are, how do you say, growing impatient. We wish to leave. We

would like to, oh yes, discover what happened to Marlow's assistant before we go, but if necessary we will depart with Mr Kane and Marlow's assets. You have until dawn, Professor. Then we take Mr Kane away with us.'

'For what?' Benny snapped.

'We said we wanted to ask him some questions, and that we still intend to do. He is only required to accompany, um, us if it turns out he murdered Marlow's assistant, which he clearly did.'

'Guilty until proven innocent, eh Stewart?'

Colour actually appeared in Mr Stewart's face for the first time Benny could recall. Was this anger? Braxiatel took his arm and steered him away, leading him through a small doorway that led back into the main building. Benny watched them go, a frown forming on her face. That was odd. She could have sworn the doorway wasn't as short before. She watched as the other members of the brotherhood passed through, each stooping to make it under the low frame. All except the last one, who sailed under the ornate beam without even having to lower his head.

'Hey,' said Benny, taking a step forward. 'Hey you, freaky Brotherhood guy.'

The last of the Brotherhood turned to see who was calling, caught sight of Bernice and quickly turned back. 'Wait!' she yelled. She grabbed his sleeve, trying to stop him from joining his fellows who had not noticed the commotion. To her surprise, the sleeve came away in her hand, revealing a slender and healthy-coloured arm beneath. Free again, the hooded figure ducked beneath Benny's arm and tore off across the hallway, slamming through the double entrance doors and tearing off across the grounds. Benny ran after him, yelling for him to stop.

The chase lasted for about two minutes before Benny lost sight of her prey.

She pulled up sharply at a fountain, breathing hard, and whirled around, looking for some indication of where the figure might have gone. She saw something move out of the corner of her eye and set off in that direction. She could see someone running parallel to a hedgerow before he dived off along a stone pathway.

Benny had to stop sharply before she crashed into a mirror standing at the end of the hedgerow. There was nobody on the pathway.

'Damn!' she spat. She'd been duped! She glanced around in desperation.

She might never get another chance to catch the guy red-handed. She couldn't afford to lose him!

She set off back the way she'd come, looking for any sign of movement in the deserted grounds. Then she saw him, and for a

moment she thought he'd got himself tangled in a tree. Then she realised he was dangling helplessly from a giant claw. The tree turned out to be Hass, now lumbering towards Benny like a stampeding bull, his claw raised aloft.

'Were you looking for this?' Hass asked, genuinely curious.

Benny nodded. 'Hass, I could kiss you.'

'No kiss necessary, Professor,' Hass assured her. 'She ran into me.'

'She?' said Bernice, pulling back the figure's hood.

The woman stared back at her, nursing a bloody nose where she'd run headlong into the Martian's armour.

It was Brenda.

Against her better judgement, Bernice had failed to drag Brenda to the Brotherhood and had not asked them to make her 'disappear' with all due haste. She hadn't done that because Brenda had pleaded with her not to.

Instead she'd brought the tearful young woman back to her own rooms and had arranged for Jason to meet them there.

The big lummoX was furious with Brenda, and understandably so. He was waving his mug of coffee around, not caring if the liquid sloshed over the rim.

'We thought you were dead!' he growled, trying his best to keep his voice down.

Brenda hugged her cloak around her shoulders for comfort with one hand and dabbed at her tears with the other, smudging her grey make-up. 'I'm sorry.'

'I think you owe us an explanation.'

Brenda blew her nose. 'Okay, where to start?' She paused, considering.

'First of all, Marlow isn't dead.'

'Why am I not surprised?' Benny said. 'Go on.'

'I'm also not just his assistant. We also, well, we're involved.'

Jason spat out his coffee. 'Come again?'

'We wanted to get married,' Brenda explained, 'but it's against the Brotherhood's code for a magician to have any kind of unprofessional relationship with an assistant. It doesn't help that Malcolm Stewart is my father.'

'Wow,' said Jason, 'that guy is one cold fish. He barely reacted when he saw your corpse.'

Brenda sniffed. 'Suppressing his emotions is a skill he's mastered over a lifetime. Makes him the perfect magician, or so he tells everyone. Made him a terrible father. Anyway, not surprisingly, when he found out about our affair he forbade us to see each other ever again. Marlow and I decided the only way for us to stay together was

if they believed we were dead. So Marlow faked a heart attack and bequeathed his entire collection to Braxiatel, intending for someone here to take the blame for my murder when the Brotherhood inevitably came looking for his stuff. Once the Brotherhood goes home with their mystery solved, Marlow's going to come and pick me up and we're going away together, for good. The ultimate disappearing trick.'

Benny shook her head. 'What were you planning to do for the poor sap who got picked on by the Brotherhood?'

'Nothing, I'm afraid. Sorry, Jason. You don't know what they're like. They would execute us both!'

'And the corpse with the semi-colon? What about her?'

'It's a dummy, used by Marlow during our magic act for a teleportation trick. It's very lifelike, and I stole some raw meat from the kitchens to get some authentically smelly blood and guts. Quite effective I thought. Of course, I had to get rid of it before you did an autopsy – it wouldn't stand up to that kind of scrutiny.'

'And you were able to move about the Collection by taking the place of one of the Brotherhood,' Benny guessed. 'Clever. But it's all over now. We're taking you to see your delightful father.'

'I can't let you do that, Benny. I'm sorry but I have to let Jason take the rap for me or else Marlow and I are as good as dead. Really dead this time.'

'Oh, so I just let them kill Jason instead, right?' Benny scoffed.

'One life for two. I think that's fair.'

'Well I don't. You're coming with us now or we'll tell your dad anyway.'

'He won't believe you without proof, and I'm the proof. He'll refuse to believe that Marlow would break the Brotherhood's code and he certainly won't believe he has been tricked.'

'Then you'd better be there when I tell him,' Benny said. She made to grab Brenda's arm. There was a puff of smoke and Benny found herself alone in the room with Jason, holding an empty cloak and cursing loudly in every language she could think of.

Daylight arrived a little earlier than usual. No doubt Braxiatel had been playing with the weather controls in preparation for the Christmas celebrations.

Benny knew what she had to do. She watched the twelve members of the Brotherhood of Magicians as they headed for the landing bay, Jason Kane walking in their midst, his head bowed. They had questioned him for most of the night and, surprise surprise, found him guilty. Braxiatel had done nothing to stop them, as was to be expected. Benny hadn't slept last night either.

Calmly, Benny put on her jacket and headed downstairs. She left the building and headed towards the group, intersecting their path towards their ship. The twelve of them glided to a halt when they saw her blocking their way.

‘Mr Stewart,’ Benny said.

He stepped forward and lowered his hood. His scalp, visible through thinning hair, reflected the sunlight. Benny wished she’d remembered her shades.

‘What can I, that is, what can we do for you?’

‘I have a proposition for you,’ she said.

‘Jason Kane has been found guilty,’ Mr Stewart purred. ‘We don’t want your life for his.’

‘I don’t want Kane,’ Benny said. Mr Stewart’s face showed a rare flinch of surprise.

‘Then what do you, ahem, require, Professor Summerfield?’

Bernice took a deep breath.

‘I wish to join the Brotherhood of Magicians,’ she said.

There was silence.

And then, in unison, every one of the twelve hooded figures broke into laughter. Benny stood her ground and let the laughter subside.

‘I’m serious,’ she said. ‘I’ve read your code. I’m allowed to audition, you have to allow me that.’

‘We do. It is, as you say, our code. However, be aware that if you have studied the secrets of the Brotherhood with a view to becoming a member and we decide to turn down your application, then that makes you an outsider with too much knowledge, much like the good Mr Kane here. If you fail the audition, Professor and, mark my, ahem, words, you will fail, we will need to ensure you disappear too.’

‘I understand.’

‘Very well. The time and place of the audition is up to you in accordance with the code.’

‘I choose ten o’clock this evening, in the main courtyard in front of the Mansionhouse.’

A thick fog rolled over the grounds of the Collection. It was raining too, turning the grass to mud and drowning Hass’s freshly planted rhododendrons in their beds.

Bernice stood on the makeshift stage, sheltered by a hurriedly erected marquee, wearing a top hat, cape and frilly white shirt. In her left hand she held a wand, in her right a deck of cards.

‘Nothing up this sleeve, nothing up my other sleeve.’ She threw the cards into the air and watched as they floated down to the ground. Without hurry, she took a dagger from her belt and thrust it into the air, impaling one of the cards before it could fall. She plucked the card

from the blade and held it out to the huge Martian dominating one side of the stage. 'Is this your card?' she asked.

Hass stood motionless, frozen in terror. Benny had somehow hoped he would turn out to be a natural performer. It wasn't to be. She leaned over and nudged him, waving the skewered card closer to his face. Hass peered at it through a fogged up visor.

'Yes,' he hissed at last. The delayed surprise in his voice got a laugh, before the applause.

The crowd, which consisted of all twelve of the Brotherhood and an array of Benny's friends and students, applauded her, some more enthusiastically than others.

Mr Stewart yawned audibly. 'Professor Summerfield, these parlour tricks are rather beneath us.'

'Hold your horses, matey,' Benny told him, wagging her finger. 'The best is yet to come.'

The box stands empty on the stage. The magician opens the doors and raps sharply on the insides with a brass-handled cane. There is nothing in the box, just darkness. The door is closed, the cabinet is sealed. 'Can I please have complete silence,' the magician says to her audience. The only sound is the falling rain, splashing in muddy puddles and hammering on the marquee roof.

The doors are thrown open. Inside the cabinet are two figures embracing. There is a gasp from the crowd. One of the figures looks up, shocked to be so suddenly on view. He lets go of his companion, who falls to the floor like a rag doll and lies still.

The Master of the Brotherhood rises to his feet. 'Marlow!' he says.

'I hope they don't make Brenda "disappear",' Jason said as he flopped onto Benny's bed. She declined to join him when he tapped his hand on the bedspread. He sounded sad as he pondered Brenda's fate.

'Jason, she tried to frame you!' Benny reminded him while packing Marlow's books back into their original crates.

Jason lay back and put his hands behind his head. 'Must you always focus on the negative?'

Benny let that one go. She picked up the dummy Brenda, found by Hass buried in the gardens and then stitched together so expertly by Ms Jones.

Solemnly she placed the fake doll in a trunk.

'Can't I keep the doll?' Jason asked with a glint in his eye.

'I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer,' Benny replied. She gazed at the fake Brenda. It was very lifelike, but in the cold light of day it was hard to believe that Marlow could ever have mistaken it for the real Brenda.

Then again, a few hastily constructed sets here, some artificial rain

and fog there and, oh yes, a complete reversal of the entire planetoid and the reprogramming of the sensor net to make the Mansionhouse look like the mill from orbit, and maybe Marlow's mistake was understandable.

Dear Jason clearly hadn't managed to put two and two together, and Bernice was having fun not making things easier for him.

'Stewart offered me a place in the Brotherhood, you know?' Benny said proudly.

Jason sat up. 'Really?'

'Yep. I said no, of course, but it's flattering to be asked.'

'So how did you do it?'

'Jason!' she said with mock outrage. 'You know a magician never reveals her secrets.'

'Well,' huffed Jason. 'A clue. You can give me a clue, can't you?'

Benny smiled, slyly.

'It was all done with smoke and mirrors,' she said.

Buried Alive

By Kate Orman

You panic. Because you know I'm down here with you.

Let's be specific:

You light another of the precious matches, trying to memorise the room so you can move on without needing your eyes. Your hands shake so badly you nearly lose the flame.

The room's not much more than a widening in the tunnel. There are rough shelves around the base; was this where the workers rested, or stored their tools? The air is heavy and old and cool and so thick with my presence that you can barely breathe.

There are lines on the walls, moving in the brief flare of light. Cartoons left by the slaves who scraped this labyrinth out of the planet's rind: the stories of those who sweated and ate and slept down here. Properly, there should be portable lights levitating in the room, cameras making a smooth survey of the walls: preserving the diggers' pictures as pure data.

You let the match burn your fingers for the last few seconds of its life. Then the dark slams down in your eyes and the panic sends you flying across the room, scrabbling at the stone, breaking your fingernails as you force yourself into the next passage.

Let's look closer. Let's look at one of your pictures:

You've always had a thing for paper, so along with the data crystals you hefted a portmanteau of journals and books and hard copies into your room at the caravansary. You refused to let your assigned slave carry the heaviest bag. The poor fellow beetled along behind you, clutching the rest of your luggage in three of his hands, protesting that he was so touched by your solicitude he was ready to give his life for you.

You told your insect slave that you hoped the opportunity wouldn't arise. He waited patiently, hands primly folded, while you explained that all you wanted was a quiet break, a few days to catch up on your backed-up reading. When he started to apologise miserably for the primitive accommodations, you assured him you'd be spending some time in the kitchen garden being refurbished in the palace grounds – the excuse for your visit, you laughed (and of course he laughed too), you were officially here to see if the Collection might be interested in contributing expertise or funds.

In your room, a message was waiting for you, darkened lines neatly

inscribed on the local yellow-orange paper.

Dear Benny, I appreciate you may have had itchy feet, but if you'd really felt the need to get off-planet so strongly, I'd have thought you could at least come talk to me about it. In fact, when you return we are going to talk about it. Do try to keep out of trouble in the meantime.

Brax.

At three-quarter scale, the room was a little too cramped to be comfortable.

While you settled down on the stones of the balcony with a blanket, melon wine and Proceedings of the *Ikkaban* Literary Society 23(2), your slave scuttled all the way to the palace. You thought he was provided by the caravansary, but he was in the employ of an officer of intelligence, an eye of the royal household.

No. I am not he. He is not the eye watching you in the dark.

The insect court was insulted to learn of your lack of interest in their archaeological project. That evening, when you were permitted to join the court's sixth meal of the day – the only one where dead food is served – it seemed that no one could talk about anything else. A small red box was set before you, the translator's bright colour reminding everyone from the council of twelve down to the platter slaves that you were an outlander. The box listened patiently to their liquid, clattering gabble and spoke in your own voice.

'The earliest documents are carved in amber beads,' a princess told you. 'An inventory of the kitchen garden in our first written language.'

'They ate many of the same foods we do today,' said one of the dodecarchs, proffering a bowl of crisp sweet greenery the translator called 'lettuce'.

'But not the same species,' interrupted another dodecarch.

'Of course they were the same species,' insisted the first dodecarch rolling his stalks. 'But more primitive strains.'

There followed an argument between a princess, the dodecarchs, and a geneticist-lawyer over whether 'primitive' was the right word for the original king's larder. A thousand years had passed since that first dynasty of bug-emperors united the continent, and horticulture had moved on a great deal since then.

The court was decorated with crystals – some were smooth, round and polished whilst others were jagged and flawed, taken unchanged from the ground. Your reading mentioned the legends of brain-powers, the will of insect minds channelled through the stones. A people raised into consciousness by their own thoughts echoing back at them from the ground, who used the crystals for scrying glasses, to smelt metals, to send messages at a distance. If there was ever a dash of truth in those legends, there was no sign of it in this court – no

miraculous powers, tools, weapons, only ornaments and trifles.

The royal family proper sat in the centre of the feasting circle, lifted up on a dais, eyes swivelling to watch the surrounding courtiers. His Effulgence Bug XXXLVII sat at the very centre, surrounded by a gaggle of queens (slightly larger) and princesses (slightly narrower). It struck you that the court, its baubles and chit-chat, was the royals' dinner entertainment.

'Of course,' said an older princess (eye-stalks elongated with age), 'we are a more civilised people than those early kings. They say they ate their slaves!'

The box translates a giggle as she playfully shoves a smaller bug carrying a goblet of juice.

'A myth,' insisted the duke. 'Our forebears were as –' the box whirls, then coughs up 'socially acceptable'

– as we. They treated their slaves well and I assure you never thought to eat them.' Another argument started, much of it involving teasing efforts to nibble the waiting staff, who joined in the laughter, terrified.

His Effulgence Bug XXXLVII clacked his mandibles together, and silence dropped into the court so suddenly that you flinched at the mistimed clatter of your fork.

'The first emperor was a god-emperor,' he pronounced. 'His court has been the model for every court for a thousand years. He raised us from the dust of this continent and made us one. We will emulate him in every respect.'

The court burst into applause. You hazily understood this was a declaration of war, a threat to unite the other continents and their hotchpotch of semi-sentients under the banner of the insects.

'That is why we recreate the god-emperor's garden,' said Bug XXXLVII. 'We will refurbish his ruins wherever we find them. We will recreate his mineral science. We will recreate his victory and leave our –' the box says, 'teethmarks' – 'on the world!'

More applause. The slaves applauded too; they understand what a new servant class, drawn from the neighbouring barbarians, would mean for them. This innocent horticultural project has an ugly second meaning, and the emperor's supporters, all the ambassadors and scientist-lawyers and the council of twelve, lapped it up. They called out their pledges of support-troops, scientists, slave workers. You knew your role was to take his message back to other worlds: Bug XXXLVII is a war-god-emperor, true scion of the first Bug.

You're starting to hear sounds somewhere behind you, three-quarters swallowed by the rock, smothered echoes standing out against the absolute silence. You have to keep moving, getting in deeper, getting

in lower, but what started as corridors wide and high enough for three humans are becoming burrows sized for the smallest insect slaves.

To reach the next chamber you must lie flat on your back, inching yourself sideways across the stone with its thousand unfinished jags, trying not to whimper at the coffin-lid weight above you in case there's some way they can hear you.

* * * *

The day after the royal feast, disturbed and intrigued, you caught an alcohol-fuelled taxi to the raised mound of the garden.

It was a disappointment – a scratchy patch of earth, not the lush planty paradise the courtiers had described. Everywhere on the red-brown soil the crawling lavender shells of slaves, misted and running with droplets of sweat.

It looked so much like some ancient dry city being inched from the sand.

But when you looked closer, when the curators plucked at your clothes and begged leave to explain their work, you saw that it was only the beginning.

There were white cords everywhere, stretched between pegs – a trap for unwary human feet, markers for the edges of the original beds that bore the well-watered lettuce and the thick aphid-bearing trees. The outlines of the original kitchen garden of Eug I's palace had been painstakingly recreated, partly from surviving descriptions carved in amber, partly from a surveyor's field notes, partly by scratching at the earth and seeing what came up. You spent hours describing your own archaeological techniques to them, their stalks stretched out to the little red box as though drinking down your words.

They had sent out teams of slaves all over the occupied continent to find samples of the original strains of plants and aphids, which were being grown and studied in a low dome nearby, a greenhouse too squat for a human to enter. They scratched through the remaining soil, finding fragments of thousand-year-old tools, fenceposts, roads, sheds, hoping for seeds.

It's as genuine a piece of science as any, whatever the emperor wants to use it for. You're vaguely aware he's been beset by political problems for years – territories demanding independence, the loss of loyalty from factions of the court. His efforts to play the war god are a scramble to stay in control. You frankly doubt if he could conquer a greenhouse, let alone a world.

One of the curators had flown over the site to take dozens of shaky photographs: it took you several minutes of conversation to realise that he had made the flight under his own power, not in any craft, which explained the blurry lines of the images. They had pieced

together the layout of the primal palace as best they could, placing the kitchen garden to the south, in the first emperors' estates.

That night, on the cool stones of your balcony, instead of browsing Watkinson's Puja to Terra Roxa, you went over and over the pictures in your mind. There was something about them that didn't ring true, something you were certain the curators had missed.

Insects leave no bones. Their bones are on the outside: the purple carapaces with their wide sun-shields and sweat-channels, the long hollow shafts of the limbs and eyes, the elaborate machinery of the face. There are no skeletons piled in this place, hard white lines twisted and soft: beneath the weight of soil and time. You won't find gold looped around chalky wrists, or skulls so crumbled they've lost their grins.

* * * *

You had only the roughest background in the insects' millennium of civilisation, no more than any competent modern archaeologist. You knew the palace had always been in the same place, layer built over successive layer as their technologies improved. Bug XXXLVII's raised dais in the centre of the feasting chamber symbolises this Tower of Babel.

It struck you all at once. The strange view was not in the photographs themselves. You looked at them in the sunlight, standing in the flat and dusty bed of the garden, and it was almost level with the other buildings – the palace proper, the princess' quarters, the slaves' warren. The original kitchen garden would have been at the very lowest level – and yet the curators were rebuilding in the exact same spot.

What did it mean? It could only mean the garden itself was raised high, lifted up when it was first built. Your first thought was that it was planted on a roof – Hanging Gardens! Whatever the garden's secret, you could be sure of one thing:

There was something under it.

You're driven on by the sounds at your back. They could be anywhere in the shafts and tunnels; there could be any number of them. The moment they catch sight of you, they'll use their sonic weapons to do to you what they did to the slave. Can they use the killing sound at a distance? Could they send it through the tunnels to you? Would they dare – would it reflect and kill their own, or perhaps collapse the roof? How many inches are you from death?

There was a communications relay satellite parked in orbit. Bug XXXLVII was only too pleased to graciously permit this proud badge of

our little world's coming of age. He's a worse underwit than I thought: it was not only a courier, it was an eye, raking over every inch of our world, mapping, measuring, noting.

Your tools could talk to the satellite. It was meant to be surveying for minerals – supposedly so that the insects below could benefit from the natural wealth of their world. (What an underwit.) The satellite was not meant to turn from this task, but you cajoled it into giving you a smidgen of its time, a smattering of its power. The next time it swept over the palace like a beetle on the wing, it looked deep beneath the ground, not for crystals or ores but for structures and spaces. It marked you a map in its own kind of amber, in three dimensions, your own model of the truth. And you saw: The mound beneath the garden was a palace of its own. There were dozens of tunnels, some filled with rubble – probably deliberately sealed – and some still filled with air after a thousand empty years. There were the remains of shafts to the surface, too narrow for even the smallest slave-child. In this web of burrows, you saw the larger chambers, deepest down, in the centre.

You knew what this was, because it's your job to know. You were looking at a tomb, chiselled from the stone while the first emperor still lived, with air shafts and access tunnels for the transport of slaves, tools, food, rubble.

Now this was a real find – something the Collection would be extremely interested in. The insects didn't know what they were planting lettuce on top of!

You pop from the narrowest of shafts and fall perhaps ten feet onto a pile of sharp and noisy objects.

You know I'm here. The fact of something's existence crawls over your skin like insect feet. You fumble with your matches, desperate not to drop them, clutching the box so hard your hand cramps.

Before you can light a match, you realise you can already see your fingers.

You squint, certain it's an illusion.

The light increases, and now you can see the mess you're standing on.

Bodies that stretch away across the great chamber at the heart of the tomb.

The empty shells of dozens of insects – perhaps hundreds. Limbs and stalks have dropped away, leaving the macabre sight of incomplete carapaces.

Some lie twisted, suffocated. Others have been shattered, brutal holes in their skulls. You're seeing the scene as it was a millennium ago –

Is this what Bug XXXLVII has planned for his court? Take their help, unite this world, and then force them to follow him into the next?

Whether or not he really is mad enough to make his funeral an audience-participation sport, the fear of it would rip the seams of the support he needs.

No army, no science teams, no new god-emperor. Not to mention the cooling off of the very new relationship he's forging with his interplanetary neighbours.

Perhaps you're not the first to open one of the shafts, not the first to stand here since Bug I died choking and laughing at the heart of his holy massacre.

Or perhaps there are secret palace records. Your curiosity has put the king's conquest in danger, and he must cut you or die himself.

You couldn't believe no one had ever found it before. The curators were astonished, stalks swivelling as they studied your photographs. At first they were sceptical that it was even possible to make an image right through the dirt and the stone, but there was an obvious way to prove it: locate one of the highest entrance points and open it.

The curators themselves brought wheelbarrows and shovels to the point you marked with white chalk. They joined the slaves in burrowing into the dirt. You offered to help, but the shovels were too short and you only had two hands; you were obliged to watch from the shade. You tried to estimate how long it would take them to find the rubble plugging the entrance. Small insects flew into your sleepy eyes; you didn't swat them, worried they might be distant relatives of your hosts.

You blinked awake as they cried out. They'd got it! The curators sent the smallest slaves down the shaft they'd dug, and they climbed in and out like ants from a nest, bringing up the small and large rocks. Gradually a pile formed on the dirt. The curators waved their hands, shouting orders, trying to prevent the slaves from trampling seedlings or burying carefully marked-out beads in stones.

Suddenly there was quiet. The curators gathered at the edge of the hole. The slaves moved aside respectfully as you stared down into the shaft they'd uncovered, your palms on your knees. A cool breath came up from under the ground. A grin spread across your face while the curators swivelled their stalks to gaze down into the newly uncovered dark.

Wouldn't the emperor be surprised!

'Get a cover over it – something to keep the dust out,' you told the curators.

They sent slaves running to obey. 'We'll get the necessary equipment together tonight. Then tomorrow morning, let's see what's

down there.'

The slave who had been assigned to carry your bags and report your words, scuttled back from the palace to the caravansary, his scurrying legs kicking up the dust of the streets.

You were in front of the caravansary, organising a consignment of fine digging tools, when he found you. Breathlessly, he scampered up to you. All his stalks swivelled to gaze into your face.

'Run,' he said. 'They're going to kill you.'

His head exploded.

Your military training kicked in before you were even aware of it. You dived into the dust, rolling away from the toppling body of the slave. It clattered as it fell, like a handful of keys dropped on the ground.

A chunk of the caravansary wall blew out over your head. Your hands were busy reaching for a weapon you weren't carrying; it took you a precious half-second to redirect your energy, to hurl yourself into the shadows between the caravansary and the building next door. You had a glimpse of the death squad sent for you, clutching their whining sonic weapons. Then: running, getting yourself deeper into the labyrinth of streets, aware you could move much faster than they, also aware that a sole alien picked out for killing has nowhere to hide.

The spaceport? You might well be safe there, if you could get into your shuttle; their sonic weapons probably couldn't penetrate its hull. But it was on the other side of the city. Could you elude them for long enough to reach it?

There was another option, close by and unlikely to be guessed at. You doubled back, listening for the clatter of the death squad: you and they were suddenly the only people on the streets.

You panic. Because you know I'm down here with you.

The pursuit can't make you lose control; you've fled for your life too many times. You've clambered and squeezed through caves to find secret paintings and hidden treasures; claustrophobic passages and pitch blackness can't frighten you.

But it isn't dark in here. There's a warm and sickly light spreading over everything. You can just make out the source, at the very centre of the chamber, spilling out from inside a large, dark object. Though it fills the chamber evenly it feels like a blinding spotlight. You shuffle left and right in the remains, but there's no exit for you, only the way you came in.

The noises behind you have stopped.

They haven't called off the search.

How much simpler and more efficient to plug the entrance again

and pretend you never visited their world.

You back up against the wall, boots crunching through bodies, and sink down, arms curling around your knees, your communication device clutched in one hand, the only sounds its fading chirp and your hammering breath.

They didn't guess you would move towards the palace – they expected either a panicked scramble ending in an accidental encounter with their guns, or for you to try to run to your ship.

The worst moment was when you had to re-enter the palace grounds. You couldn't risk an encounter with the guards there; if they had been alerted to the death order, you would simply be gunned down. You couldn't chance that Bug XXXLVII and his staff were that efficient.

Why? Why did he want you dead? Some accidental insult? Some unguessed intrigue?

The street vehicles with their little ethanol engines were light enough for you to lift, too small for you to climb inside. You tipped out a protesting driver as he slowed to park, spent half a minute working out which lever made the thing go, and then tore down the street with half your body hanging out of the open frame of the car, shouting for people to get out of the way. They got.

The pair of slave-guards at the kitchen garden gate were so startled to see you, a centaur half-machine and half-alien, that they almost ran aside too.

They gathered their courage at the last moment and raised sonic guns to challenge you, but a moment later the car crashed into the pair of them, sending them flying onto the roof of the gate, and then through the gate itself.

With only bugs aboard it probably wouldn't have had the mass to break the mesh.

You didn't slow down until you were almost at the garden, and then only because the car flipped over as you tried to steer it in a curve. You crawled out, coughing up dust, and ran limping for the raw entrance to the tomb. Curators and slaves fled, yelping, at your approach.

You knew perfectly well why he wanted you dead. You had exposed the ancient tomb of the god-emperor he wanted to emulate. There was something in that darkness he didn't want brought into the light.

In the last moment before you plunged into the ground, you took out one of your tools and sent a frantic message to the satellite. You had already broken open its doors, as you had broken open the tomb; it did what you told it to do.

Then you slipped into the mouth of death and disappeared.

Time began when we began to record it, scratching our days and names in the amber. At the beginning of time, we engineered the crystals of the earth. We opened the secret box of the powers locked in the crude ores.

Somewhere deep inside my carapace I knew my descendants would be too weak to carry this weight. I carried our greatest weapons into my own tomb.

I had those who knew the slightest part of it follow me into the ground. They could follow or they could be crushed with iron rods and thrown in pieces into the pit.

I was certain every last one of them was dead before I drained my poison draught. A mighty crystal I had lodged in my brain, a house for eternity.

I rested there until you came and filled my dark and silent space with the news I'd known would come.

Through you, I've seen what my eggs have hatched into.

We did eat our slaves, during siege unbroken for a year. These prattling modern grubs would only vomit them up again, or complain they needed sauce. Even their slaves are cowering cronies, flattering and fawning, no better than flies that whine and tickle in the face. Our slaves revolted twice.

This is what I feared. The dilution. The ennui.

This experiment of civilisation is at an end. Do you hear me, alien? It all has to be wiped clean, from that lazy n-greats-grandson of mine to his lowliest thrall.

Something moves in the half-dark, and you start to yell, and at that moment a great fist closes around you and you scream and then you're gone.

A moment later, you're high above, in a ship arcing through the black sky.

Another new satellite for our world.

You let yourself finish the scream. Six crewmembers stare down at you.

'Shil kan tor-pep!' says one of them. They're humanoids, blue with white hair: Lacaillians. 'Rescued!' he translates.

You feel as though your skin has been dragged inside your body while all your guts have been blown to the surface. Lacaillian popper technology, you think, apparently leaves a lot to be desired.

'Sit!' says the crewmember. The way your legs feel, you don't have a lot of choice: you sit down in the bottom of the smooth white half-sphere. It's like being in a very strange bathtub, big enough for ten people.

I'm still with you, like a distant crackling heard on a radio. You shudder as though to shake me off, but I'm still looking through your eyes.

The Lacaillians talk amongst themselves – you can't follow it. You can hardly hear them over the echo of your own half-gulping half-laughing breaths, echoing back from the teleportation bay.

One of them reaches a blue hand over the edge of the bay and slides a device down to you. You catch the green-and-silver ball, hoping it's not a bomb. It chimes and produces a hologram of your own dodecarch.

You stare at each other. 'Shil kan tor-pep,' you say.

'Indeed,' says Braxiatel. 'I'm as pleased as always to see you.'

'It's mutual.' The dust and filth of the underground still cling to your sweaty forehead; your shaking hand only wipes it about. 'I had no way to know if you or anybody else had got my SCS.'

'Actually, Professor, we never received your message.'

'What?' you say, faintly.

'The owners of the communications relay satellite were... most displeased with your "borrowing" it for your own purposes. They sent us an immediate formal complaint. When we were unable to contact you, I asked the Lacaillian team to drop in on their way past. When Bug XXXLVII was less than forthcoming about your whereabouts, they began a search from orbit.'

'Then, uh, how did you find me?' you ask, but you already know the answer, feeling me skitter about your shoulders like a tiny ghost.

'The satellite... began taking pictures of its own accord, apparently. Its owners were good enough to relay them to the Lacaillians as part of a further protestation. They thought you were responsible.'

'The same settings. The same below-ground scan.'

He nods. 'The pursuit couldn't have been clearer. It wasn't difficult to guess who was being pursued.' Is there a dollop of smugness in his voice? See what happens when you go tearing off like that?

'There's something down there,' you tell him. 'In the crypt.'

That's what I want of you, you aphid! Tell them all!

Braxiatel says, 'The Lacaillians tried to grab the power source with their teleportation device, but it wouldn't be taken.'

'Brax,' you say, 'I think it's –'

The hologram flickers. A moment later, you're thrown against the wall of the popper bay. The next moment, you're in zero gravity, bruised to the bone down one arm.

'Shitty shitburgers of shit!' you explode. From lethal danger to safety to – ?

'What the hell is going on?'

The hologram crackles, 'The satellite's reporting a massive power

build-up underneath the palace – no the epicentre is under the garden.
The Lacaillians are breaking orbit – they anticipate an explosion large
enough to bury the whole city. Benny, what did you do?’

‘Nothing!’ you yelp. ‘I didn’t do anything! It’s not me!’

You know who it is. You know who it is. You know it’s me.

That’s quite enough of –

There Never Need Be Longing In Your Eyes

By Ian Farrington

‘Yes, you are! You’re a lovely little angel!’

The first thing that struck Benny about Elizabeth Monroe was that her manner with children was startling. She had a natural affinity with them.

‘Coochy, coochy, coo!’

It was almost as if she was one. Benny saw her son stare up at Elizabeth, shake his head cynically and then return to the book he was reading.

‘Now, then,’ said Elizabeth, turning to Benny, who noted that her demeanour didn’t change that much when talking to adults. ‘Young Peter here will be as happy as can be with us. You can collect him this evening.’

‘Thank you,’ said Benny. She leant down to say goodbye. ‘Well, Peter...’ She recoiled as the toddler began to flap his arms about. ‘It’s okay,’ she said in reply to Elizabeth’s disturbed look. ‘He likes me really.’

Benny went to pick Peter up, but he struggled. Although he remained silent, it was as if he was saying, ‘No. Me stay here. Is nice. You go away.’ During her last-ditch attempt to calm him, Benny got a snot-covered finger in her mouth.

‘You needn’t worry!’ said Elizabeth, her bosoms shaking as she laughed.

‘He’ll calm down once you’ve gone.’ Elizabeth put her arm around Benny and led her towards the door. ‘We’ll see you at six this evening, my dear. And remember – don’t worry!’

Benny did worry, of course. She knew deep down – intellectually, you might say – that Peter would be fine. That he’d be safe. That leaving your child with a professional carer is perfectly acceptable –

But what if she’s a mad old woman who feeds my first born to rodents?

– but as she left Little Ones, the newly opened creche situated within three minutes’ walk of her rooms, Benny tried not to let –

Was that alcohol I could smell on her breath? Does she get the children drunk and sell them as slaves?

– her mind wander. But it did: was Peter okay? She hadn’t seen much of him recently. Last month, just after his fourth birthday party, she’d gone away for a few days and it had been a disaster. Even when

she'd got home, there'd been the inquest, and having her head checked for bugs. All that time away from Peter – that was why she'd gone to Little Ones in the first place. She could no longer rely on Jason, Adrian, the postman or anyone else to keep watch on her son. She was so behind on everything, and had to get some work done...

It seemed a pleasant enough place. Elizabeth Monroe was its owner: she ran the creche as if the world was a fluffy, cotton-bud-wiped, cuddly-toy-arranged playpen. Her husband, who Benny had only met the once, was a researcher visiting the Collection for a year. Bradley Monroe was an austere man; the polar opposite of his wife. Whereas she saw life as yellows, greens and blues, he saw it as greys, charcoals and browns. Benny also got the distinct impression that he'd rather jab an electrode into his earhole than spend any amount of time around children. Hang on, that didn't bode well –

Maybe he'll dismember my baby and sew him back together in the wrong order?!

Shuddering at her own paranoia, Benny went home.

Jason was waiting for her, as planned. She'd called him earlier in the day and asked him to meet her at her place after she'd dropped Peter off.

'Morning, Benny,' he said. 'Everything's going to be all right.'

'Well, I hope so,' she replied, unlocking the door. 'I'm also in mourning for this...' She pointed upwards at the room's light fixtures. 'Went out last night,' she explained. 'And seeing as I know you're a dab hand with a screwdriver, I thought you might want to fix it for me.'

Jason smiled. 'Oh, yeah? What happened to Benny the independent, doesn't-need-a-man-to-help-out can-manage-anything-life-throws-at-her modern woman?'

'Look,' said Benny before calming herself. 'I'd be grateful for your help.'

After a moment's thought, Jason said with a smirk, 'How grateful?'

'Quite grateful.'

She opened the door, and motioned for Jason to go inside. He immediately began to look enquiringly at the light switch.

'I'll leave you to it, then?' she said. 'It won't take you long, will it?'

Jason hmm'd back as he lightly brushed the switch, looking at it as if it were a newly discovered crypt; he seemed to be touching it for texture whilst trying not to disturb it in any way.

'Remember to lock up when you've finished.' But it was to no avail: Jason was a man with a mission. And a screwdriver.

Leaving Jason to it, Benny went to Braxiatel's office. He wasn't there – she knew he wouldn't be, as he was off-world attempting to negotiate

the purchase of some Koteem crockery. Or was it some Slithergee silverware?

More importantly, was he avoiding Benny? Am I ever going to be forgiven, she asked herself. Will I find another job?

Work: must concentrate on work; it'll keep the mind active.

She had a meeting lined up with one of Braxiatel's engineers, a young man called Willand Hayer who by all accounts was a complete know-it-all when it came to the Collection's online computer system.

'Hello, Benny,' he said enthusiastically as she approached. He was one of those people whose smiles lit the room. Benny shook his hand and sat down next to him.

'Good to see you again, Willand.'

They'd arranged to meet because Benny had a problem. Recently, she'd logged on to the Collection's computer network in order to see her own recent thesis – a work-in-progress paper she'd posted up for all the other academics, both visiting and resident, to make comment and add notes. She would then rewrite the paper and submit it: an excuse not to have to think about... things.

Yesterday, however, she'd looked at the message board, expecting to see insightful analysis and penetrative examination of her points. She was surprised, then, with what she'd seen when she'd typed her name into the search engine. Despite herself, it had shaken her. Why her? Why now?

After staring at the screen in disbelief, she'd called Willand and gone mad at him. Hysterical behaviour had been involved. (What had that bug done to her?) He'd calmed her down, offered his help. She trusted him. He was nice.

'I had a look last night,' he said in a warm, reassuring tone. 'Blimey, Benny, you were right. Terrible situation. Are you sleeping okay?'

'Well...' she said, slightly taken aback. 'Um, no – but not because of this.'

'Still, it mustn't be nice.'

'It's not.' Benny watched as Willand powered up his terminal. 'Why do they have to be so cruel?'

'I'm going to put one of them up on-screen. Is that okay?' he asked. When Benny grimly nodded, he manipulated the mouse and clicked on the 'UPLOAD' icon. A blue bar began to slowly creep along the bottom of the screen.

'Has Peter seen them?'

Benny was not expecting the question. 'Of course not! His reading ability wouldn't be up to it.'

'Reading ab...' Willand's mouth stayed open. Benny noted that the blue bar was now more than halfway across the screen. 'What, um, why would reading ability come into it...?' His smile was now more

nervous than soothing.

‘The reaction to my thesis,’ Benny said, slowly and unsure. ‘All those sarcastic comments pointing out my misplaced colons and incorrectly used transitive verbs...’ Willand’s face scrunched up in frustration. ‘Why?’ Benny said, sternly. She then followed his eyes to the screen: the bar was speeding up; three seconds, two seconds, one second, ping!

On the screen a photograph popped up. It was of Benny. Another replaced it: a similar pose, just as sleazy. Then another, and another: in all of the images, Benny’s face had been planted on to the body of another woman. A woman of fewer inhibitions. And clothes.

‘This isn’t what the message was about, is it?’ Willand was visibly trying not to look at the screen, though his eyes did dart a glance at least three times whilst he spoke.

‘No, it bloody well is not! I called you because everyone’s making fun of my thesis! I wanted to know how to take it offline!’

‘Oh. I see.’ The images were still changing every few seconds. Whoever it was whose body had been used, she sure was athletic. Benny was finding it – breast – hard to concentrate on the – *cleavage* – matter in hand. The photographs were very, very – nipple – distracting.

‘Can you stop these... these forgeries from appearing?’ she asked Willand, tersely.

‘Oh, sorry. Of course.’

‘I can’t believe all this,’ said Benny. ‘Especially at a time like this. I should be worrying about my son, or the inquest, or whether I’m going to be a free woman come tomorrow, but no, I have to deal with petty pornography!’

‘Well...’ said Willand, as if he was summing up his thoughts, ‘you’re right, they must be uncomfortable for you to look at, and you have every right to have some control over how you’re presented...’

‘I’m waiting for a “but”.’

‘Oh, that picture takes *ages* to download.’

‘Cute, but can you take them down? A man of your skills, surely?’

He flashed her a winning smile. ‘I’ll do my best.’

‘Thanks, Willand.’

‘It’s my intense pleasure. Who do you think could have done this to you? Do you have enemies?’

Benny got up to leave. ‘Countless, at the moment.’ She was just out of the door when she heard Willand call after her.

‘Look on the bright side. At least in these, your colon isn’t misplaced.’

There was hardly enough time for Benny to nip back to Little Ones

and see Peter before her next appointment. From the reception area, Benny could see her son. He was sat in the corner on his own. Some distance from the others, he was reading a book; one with a big picture of a balloon on its cover.

After her stressful – and somewhat embarrassing – morning, it was reassuring to see how content Peter seemed. He looked completely at peace with the world, entirely confident in his being. He clumsily turned a page and his eyes scanned down the new spread.

‘The monkey had it in the tree!’ he shouted out to no one in particular.

Benny felt so proud. She saw Peter immediately go back to the start of the book and he began to read it again.

‘He’s advanced for his age, isn’t he?’ Benny hadn’t noticed Elizabeth Monroe sidle up to her. ‘Which is more than I can say for this little grumpy so and so...’ Again, her voice turned sugary as she talked to her husband, who was standing idly besides her.

He looked unimpressed.

‘Bradley!’ The inherent cuddly toy inside Elizabeth lost control to the frustrated wife. ‘You remember Miss Summerfield, don’t you?’

‘Charmed, I’m sure,’ he yawned.

‘Bradley’s come to have lunch with me,’ said Elizabeth before Benny could respond to the man’s less-than-warm attitude. ‘Haven’t you, dear? We’re then going to join the children in their afternoon sing-song!’

‘Well, my little cherub of cheerfulness, that’s what you may be doing,’ said Mr Monroe. ‘I have work to do.’

‘More classes on manners?’ said Benny under her breath. ‘A Ph.D. in politeness?’

‘What was that, love?’ asked Elizabeth.

‘Oh, nothing. So, Peter’s okay, is he? No tantrums, no fits?’

‘He’s been an absolute pumpkin! Why don’t you go and say hello?’

Benny walked through to the enclosed creche area, stepping over toddlers of various races left, right and centre, all engaged in various activities which all called for repeatedly banging toys against the floor. She found Peter sat away from the others. He didn’t look up from his book, which he was now chewing the corner of.

‘Hello, Peter.’ He looked up at her fleetingly. ‘What are you reading?’ He didn’t reply. Benny’s stomach ached inside. For weeks now, she’d known that something was wrong, that her connection, her relationship, with Peter was suffering. But she’d had to put it to the back of her mind. She was facing prison.

A dull, thudding thought had consistently pounded her brain over the last few weeks: every now and again it had flashed into her mind. *What if my son doesn’t love me?* Her life – her everyday activities – had

been taking over. Being so busy with other things, it was easy to shove the thought away, push it out of reach for the time being. However, the more she ignored the thought, the more frequently it appeared – and each time it was bigger, more intrusive, heavier.

Elizabeth came over and picked Peter up. ‘Time for his lunch,’ she smiled – but Benny wasn’t really listening. As she walked out of the creche’s enclosure, she became aware of someone huffingly making a point of being seen.

‘I suppose you intended to close it eventually,’ said Bradley Monroe. He was locking shut the four-foot-high security door that stopped the children from wandering out of the place. ‘Maybe sometime next week?’ he sneered.

‘Sorry,’ said Benny. ‘Got a bit lost in my own thoughts there.’

Monroe eyed her with contempt before striding out. Benny saw that Elizabeth had expected a goodbye, but didn’t get one.

Down at the Collection’s spacedock, Benny was having a tough afternoon.

She’d been waiting for the arrival of a ship from Oultram XII; its cargo would be her workload for the next week or so. Cataloguing, archiving and assessing were three of the less glamorous duties of a Collection archaeologist, but they still needed doing.

She’d now been waiting for three and a half hours. Her only company was the dock’s foreman; a rotund cheerless man called Teger. He spent most of his working day, it seemed to Benny, staring intently at his clipboard, occasionally looking up and glancing at the time.

‘When did you say the cargo ship from Oultram XII was arriving?’ asked Benny for quite possibly the thousandth time.

Teger shrugged. ‘Dunno.’

‘Could you find out?’

‘Hmm?’ He looked up. ‘Aye.’ He looked back down again and a few seconds passed.

‘Now?’

‘Oh. Right.’ Teger called up some information on his office’s monitor. ‘Any minute,’ he said after a cursory glance.

‘You said that two hours ago!’

‘Aye.’

Benny was unsure what delicate manoeuvre she would have made next in the complex negotiations, had the alarms not then gone off, indicating that the cargo ship was docking. The landing procedure took around fifteen minutes. Once the crew were off the ship, Benny went to find the captain. She wanted simply to collect the goods and make a dash for it. After this, she was going to go and collect Peter

early and go home. It would be a nice, peaceful even-

‘Are you Mrs Summerfield?’ The captain’s holler disrupted Benny’s thoughts.

‘Um... Professor, actually.’

‘Right, this is for you.’ He motioned behind him to a man who stood looking very troubled. He had bruises spotted around his face, and looked decidedly grumpy. ‘He’s all yours now. Sorry he’s a bit damaged, but – well, he resisted slightly.’ The captain began to walk off.

‘Wait, wait, wait,’ said Benny. ‘What is this?’

‘It’s what you ordered.’

‘I did not order this!’

‘Um,’ said the bruised man. ‘I am here, you know?’

‘Look, sweetheart. I get the order sheet; I go off and collect the goods; I bring them back. I’ve got the order sheet here.’

‘Look, I remember standing here not two weeks ago, dictating to Tegor there, what exactly it was I wanted. I asked for you to bring me the Covenant of Oultram. It’s a millennia-old legal document which was recently unearthed during a dig on Oultram XII.’

‘That’s not what it says here, darling.’

Benny ripped the paper out of his hand and read the handwritten order. She coughed nervously and then looked at the beaten man, standing behind the captain.

‘So,’ she said. ‘You’ll be the *Governor* of Oultram, then?’

* * * *

That was odd. The lights were off. Benny looked at her watch: 17.36. Little Ones should still be open, she thought. They’re not expecting me until six o’clock.

Benny tried the door – it was unlocked, and she made her way in.

‘Hello?’ Benny considered the fact that she’d only said that in a low hush.

What was the point of that? There was no one in the room – who the hell was going to hear her?

She crept round the creche, checking behind the desk and even lifting up cuddly toys to look underneath. After a few minutes, she found herself standing in the middle of the room.

‘Well, where the buggers is everyone?’ she said. She then, quite by chance, spotted a light under the doorway at the back of the room. It wasn’t bright – in fact, the ‘light’ was more a lighter shade of darkness than anything else.

Benny slowly crept over. As she approached, she began to make out the dull murmur of chatter. A terse, frustrated voice: ‘... I’m doing it, I’m doing it now!’ It was Bradley Monroe.

Then, a shrill reply: 'Well, do it quicker – the parents will be here soon!' And this was Elizabeth.

Benny quickly tried the door: it was locked. She heard panicked voices from inside – but her own panic meant she didn't take in the words. She shouldered the door, expecting a few barges to break it – but her first shove resulted in her crashing into the small ante-room.

Regaining her composure, Benny took it in: on the floor, conscious but in a drowsy state, were sat about a dozen toddlers; Elizabeth and Bradley were standing by the far wall. Benny's heart skipped a beat when she saw that they had Peter strapped into a seat. He had suckerpads attached to his temples, and a drip inserted in his forearm.

Bradley whipped round with a handgun and pointed it at Benny. 'Miss Summerfield!' he said. 'How dramatically ironic.'

'You touch as much as a single hair on his body, I'll –'

'Now, now, dear,' said Elizabeth, looking worried. 'Calm down.'

'Calm down? Calm down? Oh, perhaps you're right. My child has been kidnapped and experimented on by a couple of weirdoes, one of whom is pointing a gun at me – what's the point in getting agitated? Yes, you're quite right. Why don't I sit down and have a cream bun?'

'It's not what you think, dear.' Elizabeth seemed genuinely concerned.

'Oh, a game is it? Torture 'n' matricide?'

'It would only be matricide if the child were to kill you,' said Bradley.

'Pedantry as well as murder? Boy, aren't you the man of culture?'

'Listen.' Elizabeth slowly moved towards Benny, stepping over a toddler or two on her way. 'Peter will be fine; he'll be unharmed, and won't even remember this afterwards.'

'Goddess, what sort of world is it where you can't leave your child safely at a day-care centre?'

'This sort of world, Miss Summerfield,' said Bradley.

'Quiet!' his wife snapped at him. 'Benny, you may know us as Mr and Mrs Dr Bradley Monroe – Elizabeth and Bradley, Liz and Brad; looker-afters of children, friends to the community and all-round good eggs...'

'Well, maybe the first bit...'

'...but in fact we're alien to this dimension. I'm actually Major Nryn and "Bradley" here is Sergeant Reysomris. We come from an alternate reality and are here on a fact-finding mission.'

'Which involves the subjugation of infants? The morality of research methodology is obviously less advanced where you come from.'

'We come in peace – honestly, we do,' said Nryn.

'Then why is Sergeant Whatsit over there pointing a gun at me?'

A look from Nryn was enough for Reysomris to lower his gun – but

not out of sight.

‘That’s better,’ said Benny. ‘Now, what would fact-finding aliens from an alternate dimension want with my son?’

‘His brainwaves, his thought processes –’

‘His consciousness?!’

‘No, nothing so mundane, dear,’ said Nyrn. ‘We’re investigating why your children are so overlooked, ignored, underestimated, when they represent the height of intelligence in almost every developed species.’

‘I’m sorry – I’m losing the plot here.’

‘Our initial research,’ said Reysomris, ‘showed us that in your culture it is the young who possess the true positions of power. Oh, they may do it surreptitiously; you may not be aware of it – but they manage to skilfully manipulate any situation around them. Running this institution allowed us to observe it in more detail: the children are carried from place to place, even pushed in specially designed chairs; they are fed regularly and healthily; constantly being entertained and watched over; they have no stress, money worries, responsibilities... your entire society is geared to their well-being, their protection and their development. That’s real power.’

Benny stared at him.

‘The younger they are,’ said Reysomris, ‘the smarter they are.’

‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘That’s as may be, dear, but it’s perfectly harmless,’ said Nyrn. ‘We’re not taking anything from your son, only, well, copying.’

Benny looked at Peter. His eyes were open, but looked sleepy. The machinery he was attached to by the suckerpads was humming slightly.

‘It’s barbaric,’ she said, moving towards Nyrn. ‘It’s inhuman!’ She cut off Reysomris before he could speak: ‘Yes, I know you’re not human, it’s a figure of speech.’

‘Oh, don’t be like that, my love,’ said Nyrn. ‘It’s been bad enough having to lie and sneak about.’

‘Feeling guilty, are we?’

‘Look,’ said Nyrn. ‘We’ll stop, okay? Just don’t tell anyone.’ She moved towards Peter and began to unhook him. Reysomris spun round and grabbed her arm.

‘Major, no!’

Benny saw her chance and pushed Reysomris to the ground. His gun fell from his hand and Benny kicked it away. He was strong, however, and bounced back, knocking Benny backwards.

‘Sergeant!’ shouted Nyrn. ‘We’re in enough trouble as it is, without injuring the locals.’

Benny had fallen onto a pile of children’s toys. She grabbed three small beanbags and threw them at Reysomris, who was barring down

on her. With him disorientated – or distracted, at any rate – Benny jumped up and smashed him over the head with a toy train.

Nryn cried out. Reysomris fell to the floor, unconscious. Benny took a deep breath.

Security arrived quickly, and Nryn and Reysomris were taken away. The former Elizabeth Monroe had been distraught with guilt. As she was led out, passing the kids' picture gallery made her burst into tears.

Reysomris was carried out on a stretcher. Half awake, he turned to Benny and said, 'Don't underestimate them. They are your future.'

After all the fuss, after security had done their job and other parents had been to collect their young, Benny was left alone in the creche with Peter.

Holding his hand, Benny led her son through to the ante-room. She wanted one last look around – to calm her nerves, settle her stomach; to make sure her last memory of the room was one in which Peter was safely under her protection.

The machinery had been left on. Its throbbing hum a constant reminder of what had been going on at Little Ones. She walked over to turn the power off, but then noticed a small monitor to the side. Before she switched it off, Benny read the readout: 'P. Summerfield – high emotional connection with mother'.

Benny took her son home. There was a note on the door in immaculate handwriting.

'You're in the clear. B.'

That was all it said. Benny took the note off the door, scrunched it up and took Peter inside. Jason had just finished changing the bulb.

'It's taken you this long?' asked Benny.

'It wasn't just a simple job of screwing in a light bulb, Benny. You'd shorted the main wire, I had to replace an entire connection box. But, thanks to me – all is now fine.'

Proudly, he switched on the light. And blew the entire building's electrical supply.

In the sudden darkness, Peter began to laugh. 'Silly Jason.'

'The younger they are,' said Benny, 'the smarter they are. You know, Peter, maybe they had a point.'

Mentioning the War

By Nick Walters

Bernice burst into Braxiatel's study unannounced, as she always did. But this time he was in, sitting in his office chair, flicking elastic bands at something on his desk.

'Oh, hello Bernice,' he said, casually, just before loosing off another round.

Bernice frowned at him, determined not to fall for anything. 'Getting in the mood for the conference?'

He swivelled round to face her. 'I knew you wouldn't approve. That's why I wanted to talk to you about it personally, face to face. Thanks for coming.'

'Too right I don't approve! Goddess, Brax, after all we've been through – is it a good idea to drag it all up again?'

Braxiatel leaned back and put his hands behind his head. 'It's not a conference about the Occupation, Bernice, but about conflict and warfare in general. You don't have to sit in on the papers about you.'

'There are papers about me?'

He smiled thinly at her.

Bastard.

'That's not the point,' she said. 'It's too soon. Wounds are still fresh. People are still mourning.'

Braxiatel stood up. 'All the more reason to have this conference, help us put it all behind us.' He made a bracing gesture with his fists. 'It's been nearly two years since the Occupation ended, anyway. This'll show everyone that we're back, we're serious, and we're not afraid.'

He obviously wasn't going to change his mind. 'I won't be the only objector, you know. You're not going to be very popular.'

'Oh, Yackle's behind me. And several of the others.' He wandered over to the row of alcoves lining the far wall. 'War is all around us,' he said, pointing to the towering statues of the Levithian Grafs standing forever to attention in the alcoves. 'We can't escape it, so we may as well try to understand it.'

'Perhaps I don't want to understand it.'

Braxiatel walked right up to her. 'Bernice. We need this conference. The Occupation's over, we have to get on with life. Earn our place in the scheme of things.' His eyes were wide worlds. 'All of us.'

Of course. Now he wanted something from her they were best friends again.

'Nothing I can say will dissuade you from this?'

‘No.’

The pale-moustachioed faces of the Levithian Grafs stared down impassively at Bernice. She sighed. ‘Well as long as you don’t expect me to deliver the keynote speech. Again.’

Braxiatel waved a hand. ‘Oh no, I’ve got someone else in to do that. Guest speaker. Professor Ovmakh.’

‘Who?’

‘A leading light in martial archaeology.’

‘Martian archaeology?!’ choked Bernice.

‘Martial.’

Bernice made a face. ‘Oh. Ugh.’

Braxiatel wandered back to his desk. There was a wary look in his eyes which told Bernice that there was more to come. ‘She’s bringing a team and... they’re going to do a bit of digging. In the grounds.’

Bernice gaped. ‘Why? We got rid of all the Axis tech, destroyed their control centre – there’s nothing left.’

Braxiatel walked up to a shelf, took a book down and flicked through a couple of pages. He avoided her gaze and shrugged. ‘You can’t be too sure.’

The words sent a chill down the back of Bernice’s neck. Without saying anything, she walked out of the study. A sense of depression dragged her heart and slowed her mind to a crawl. Can I be sure it really is all over?

She shook her head, taking a firm mental hold of herself, and went off to find Peter.

The conference wasn’t for another three weeks, but the time passed like nothing. Bernice had a sudden influx of students, needing to see her for the first time in months. She was flattered at first, then realised the end of the year was upon them and they were only interested in her for their grades.

She had also grudgingly agreed to give a paper on the Occupation, and she wasn’t finding it easy to write at all.

Jason was no help – he was hellishly busy with the mundane, non-academic conference preparations with Ms Jones: delegate lists, accommodation, catering, marketing, agendas, the strange requests of some of the guests, and generally running around like a blue-arsed fly. You’d think after all the conferences they’d had this year they’d have got on top of things by now, but no – things were getting increasingly on top of them. And not in a good way.

Worst of all, Peter wasn’t well. It appeared to be ‘flu, but Adrian explained that it was a natural element of Killoran biology, all a part of growing up.

Though how two weeks of delirium, diarrhoea and the chucks

helped anyone grow up was beyond Bernice.

So it was a miracle that in the midst of all this chaos, irritation and grief, Bernice managed to find out something about their Guest of Honour.

Professor Ovmakh – there were no records of a first name – Vellophoi specialist in martial archaeology. The term still made Bernice grimace.

Published widely on all the major battles in the sector, even seen some action on Mardus and Farlorne. Not really surprising then that she was coming to the Collection, itself a former battlefield. Oh, and she'd been on Mars for a while – Goddess, that thing Hass had given her to read all those months ago – it'd been written by her. Bernice hoped Ovmakh hadn't actually heard about that keynote speech, then...

So, the Vellophoi were aliens – on the datafile they looked rather like feline versions of humans. Their homeworld, Vellophon, had been annexed by the Axis and most of the population enslaved or imprisoned.

Including, presumably, the Professor herself.

The only salient facts about the Vellophoi Bernice managed to trap within her whirling mind in the frantic days leading up to the conference were: one, they have no sense of humour; and two, they are genetically modified from an early age.

Sounded almost as bad as the Axis themselves.

Or their masters... but Bernice put such uncharitable thoughts behind her.

The Vellophoi had suffered too. They were bound to have other things in common.

Bernice shaded her eyes and watched as the Ormand-Seltec flyers drifted out of the blue and onto the green.

'Blimey,' said Jason. 'How many of them are there?'

'Only about fifteen are so. Most of those are carrying their equipment.'

Jason made a face. 'Well they'd better not dig up the Garden of Whispers.'

'No one would dare, not even Brax,' she said, glancing over at where Braxiatel stood, beaming up at the descending flyers.

A small crowd had turned out to welcome the Vellophoi expedition. Bernice was there because Braxiatel had told her that, as head of archaeology at the Collection, she should be the one to welcome and work with their visiting professor.

The flyers landed and the Vellophoi disembarked.

Bernice noted with some disquiet that they were wearing uniforms –

tight-fitting grey uniforms with black flashing. It was almost as if they were being invaded again. But no one apart from Bernice seemed to notice this, judging by the excitement on people's faces, the cheers of welcome and applause.

The Vellophoi formed a double line in front of the last flyer to land. Like a guard of honour. Bernice almost expected them to present arms as the door slid open and a figure emerged. This one was wearing a silver uniform which glinted in the sunshine.

Had to be Professor Ovmakh.

'Talk about making an entrance,' Bernice muttered to Jason. She walked over to their new guest, determined despite herself to get things off on a good footing.

'Professor Ovmakh!' she cried heartily. 'Welcome to the Collection.'

Ovmakh's smile looked rather mocking, even condescending – but Bernice checked herself against making human assumptions; it could be the Vellophoi smile of welcome after all.

'Professor Summerfield.' Something in the low, musical voice told Bernice that her reputation had gone before her. 'Pleased to make your acquaintance.'

Ovmakh held out a hand. It was covered in velvety grey fur, and from the fingertips tiny black claws extruded.

Neat. Bernice held out her own hand and they shook, Bernice smiling at the Professor. Her face was remarkably feline: cat-like green eyes, a small snub nose and a wide mouth that showed small, pointy teeth when she smiled. Her smooth fur was strangely styled into a glossy black quiff between her triangular ears. It hung down and almost obscured her left eye.

'Pleased to meet you, too,' said Bernice. A joke formed on her lips but died there as she remembered the Vellophoi lack of humour. 'I look forward to your keynote speech.'

'And I look forward to working with you on our excavation. I read your excellent paper on funeral rites on Mars.' Again that piercing stare.

Bernice, ears blushing, waved a hand around the unloading flyers. 'What exactly are you hoping to find here?'

Those green eyes flashed. 'We do not hope to find anything, Professor Summerfield. We will find something. Ah, Irving.'

Bernice found herself gently sidelined – so much for her buddying role – and slunk away to where Jason was overseeing one of the admin robots unloading a flyer.

'Made friends?'

Bernice pulled a face. 'Hard to tell. I think she knows something about me I'd rather people didn't know.' She looked back to where Braxiatel was leading Ovmakh around the Garden of Whispers. 'What

the hell's he told her?'

Despite her misgivings, Bernice found herself getting interested in the preparations for the dig. She watched as the uniformed Vellophoi hastily set up their camp of geodesic tents. She gathered that they had 'detected' something beneath the surface of the grounds next to the garden, and wanted to start excavating right away. Hass was not happy one bit, and – amazingly – he had a lot of support. Jason was dealing with that one.

She caught up with Professor Ovmakh as she was overseeing the installation of a monstrous excavating device. Its curved carapace gleamed in the spring sunshine like that of an enormous woodlouse. It squatted at an angle to the lawn, its business end idling, ready to tear into the fresh green grass.

'Impressive,' said Bernice, just to make the effort. 'Hope you replace any divots you might make.'

Ovmakh's ears twitched – though what that meant, Bernice had no idea.

'Professor Summerfield, you're just in time for the beginning of the excavation.'

'Oh good,' said Bernice, stepping into the shadow of the excavator.

'I always say archaeology is the careful peeling back of layer after layer of topsoil, the teasing away of every tiniest bit of mud.'

Ovmakh smiled, but not at Bernice; at the excavator. 'No need for that here. We know where our goals lie.'

'How?'

'We've scanned this planetoid and discovered anomalies beneath the surface. The artefacts themselves are shielded against detection, but whoever placed them utilised warp technology. There are traces of temporal disturbance in the earth. It is towards these traces we will dig.'

Bernice shuddered. 'Look, isn't this rather dangerous? A job for the military? Although you lot dress like soldiers, you're not.'

'This planetoid is under protection, should we need it. Star forces have been alerted to the possibility of danger.'

Star forces. That Ovmakh had said it with a straight face proved once and for all the complete lack of a sense of humour in the Vellophoi.

'And what are you going to do with the stuff once you've found it?'

The smile again. 'Take it to my Collection.'

The capital 'C' was obvious. Bernice wondered if Braxiatel knew.

Uniformed Vellophoi began milling around the excavator, adjusting settings. There was a rising hum of energy, and a babble of comment from the assembled students and academics.

Everyone seemed excited.

‘You know,’ said Bernice, ‘You can’t really call this archaeology. The Occupation’s too recent, the artefacts you’re after are brand spanking new in historical terms. You could call it “micro-archaeology” if you want, but I can think of something worse.’

Ovmakh’s ears twitched again, but her attention was on the excavator. She began calling out instructions to her team. The hum from the excavator increased in pitch, and its blades started rotating, slowly at first, and then with gathering speed.

Bernice couldn’t bear to watch it meet the innocent green grass. Bollocks to Braxiatel’s request.

She turned away and went to see how Peter was.

But she couldn’t ignore the exultant scream of the excavator.

Peter was fine. He was actually smiling, and the film over his eyes had cleared up. Bernice forgot all about Ovmakh and the excavation. Until Joseph ‘beeped’ with a message from the dig.

They’d found something. Already.

Bernice returned to the excavation site, a feeling of dread sloshing around inside her. When she got there she found the site much changed – there were great mounds of brown earth piled behind the excavator and, at the other end of the machine, a geodesic tent had been erected.

Bernice went in to find two Vellophoi students guarding the entrance of a tunnel. Well, they were just standing there, but those uniforms...

‘Professor Ovmakh is waiting for you,’ said one of them, indicating the tunnel entrance.

Bernice stepped towards the edge. The hole was about two metres wide, and sloped sharply down – she couldn’t see very far. A kind of portable staircase had been unrolled along the floor of the tunnel, and its sides had been shored up by a substance that looked like thick, rigid cling film. The smell of warm plastic and turned earth was pungent in the clammy air inside the tent.

‘It’s perfectly safe,’ said the other student.

‘We’ll see about that,’ said Bernice, stepping onto the staircase and descending into the planetoid.

The tunnel led a short way down at a fairly steep angle, then flattened out. Bernice had no idea how they’d done this, and so quickly – Vellophoi excavation technology was clearly state-of-the-art. Light came from blue bulbs strung out along the ceiling which made Bernice feel as if she was in a nightclub, but which probably looked like natural daylight to the Vellophoi.

The end of the tunnel opened out into a circular chamber. A team of

Vellophoi were still in the process of applying shoring material to the walls, and two of the angular aliens were scraping earth back from what looked like a portaloo designed by HR Giger.

Before this strange find stood Professor Ovmakh, hands on hips. For someone without a sense of humour, Ovmakh certainly smiled a lot, though only at objects it seemed – when she turned to face Bernice the smile vanished.

‘Congratulations,’ said Bernice. She knew how Ovmakh must be feeling despite the differences between their approaches, and their species. The exultation of discovery... Bernice shared in it for a moment But only a moment ‘What is it?’

‘A Field Robotisation Unit’

Bernice felt as though she’d been physically struck. She stared at the thing, and felt sick. She remembered what they had done to her father, and the sickness rose up inside her. ‘We’ve got to destroy it!’ she shouted.

Ovmakh’s ears twitched. ‘Why?’

Bernice was shaking with rage. ‘Why? You know what that thing is – what it can do!’

‘But it’s not going to do it any more, is it?’ Ovmakh purred. She was staring at Bernice with sudden intensity, her pale fur icy blue in the light. ‘And we can study it, learn from it.’

‘No,’ said Bernice. ‘This has to be a purge. We must find all this shit, find it and destroy it!’

Ovmakh turned back to the unit. ‘They obviously put it here to enforce full collaboration, but equally obviously, they didn’t need it.’

It took a few seconds for this to sink in. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

Ovmakh stared at her. ‘I simply meant that the Occupation was over before they had a chance to use it.’

‘I bet you did.’ Bernice suddenly couldn’t stand to be in this enclosed space with the thing and Professor Ovmakh any more. She turned and stomped back along the tunnel.

She bumped into Braxiatel on the way, and went to shove past him, but he grabbed her shoulder. ‘Bernice?’

‘Brax,’ said Bernice, unable to keep the anger from her voice. ‘You’re using this conference – using Ovmakh – to get at all the buried tech.’

Braxiatel smiled, his face ghostly in the blue light. ‘Bernice... trust me.’

‘Just get rid of it!’ snapped Bernice. ‘And her.’

Braxiatel muttered something but Bernice was already halfway up the ladder.

It felt good to be outside again.

‘Wars are the keystones of history. Without them, large sections of the past would be unknown to us.’

Without wars, large sections of the past would at least still exist, thought Bernice.

Professor Ovmakh was delivering her keynote speech to a packed-out conference hall. Bernice had a front-row seat, as befitting her position in the Collection, next to Braxiatel. Jason was on door duty, the poor sod.

‘My discipline, martial archaeology,’ Ovmakh went on, ‘is the key to understanding warfare, to understanding why conflicts happen, piecing together the events from ancient battlefields. My Collection – confiscated by the Axis during their occupation of my homeworld – is being reassembled.’

The defeat of the Axis has added many valuable new artefacts to the Collection. Only this morning, a Field Robotisation Unit – safely deactivated,’ she glanced at Bernice, ‘was found on this very planetoid. And work is under way to discover more.’

Ovmakh paused for applause, but Bernice only grudgingly joined in when Braxiatel nudged her. As if he was prompting her, as if her clapping was essential to his plans.

‘Maybe by studying such artefacts we can understand their makers, and prevent future conflicts.’

Ovmakh had got it all wrong. A serious fetish for military hardware was not the way to avoid future wars. It might even help to cause them.

And so Ovmakh went on, and so Bernice squirmed. It was clear that Ovmakh loved war – especially the hardware. Bernice remembered the gleam in her eyes when she was looking at the robotisation unit. Like a big kid obsessed by bigger guns. But Bernice couldn’t deny that she knew her stuff.

The meat of the paper was a dazzling resume of the major historical conflicts in the sector, drawing parallels Bernice never dreamed were there. And an analysis of military stratagems that made them sound like music, or a natural process like the orbits of planets around a star.

Ovmakh was making war sound dangerously glamorous.

Bernice thought of the robotisation unit. Obscene technology dedicated to dehumanisation.

She looked at Ovmakh, tall and thin and unequivocal, like a salute.

And she shivered in her seat.

After the paper, everyone gravitated naturally to Cafe Vosta. Bernice felt alone despite the crowd of chattering academics and enthusiastic students. She wanted to get back to her rooms and Peter, maybe grab Jason away from his work for a coffee and a hug – but she suddenly

found herself face to face with Ovmakh.

‘Professor Summerfield.’ Was there a hint of seeking for approval in her cat-like eyes? Or was Bernice, again, attributing human feelings to the alien visitor? ‘I hope you found my paper interesting.’

‘It was certainly that,’ said Bernice lightly. ‘But you made it sound like our entire discipline depends on people slaughtering each other.’

Ovmakh’s ears twitched – it suddenly struck Bernice that this was the Vellophoi equivalent of a frown. ‘That is rather an overreaction. You cannot deny that wars are important historical events.’

‘I don’t think you realise what we went through here,’ said Bernice. ‘The Occupation ended almost two years ago, but the scars run deep. And now you turn up, and start churning up the grounds for treasure...’

Ovmakh was glaring at her. ‘We suffered too, Professor Summerfield. Our scars also run deep.’

Bernice had momentarily forgotten about the Axis occupation of Vellophon. ‘Sorry – look, we’ve both been victims, perhaps we could talk – there might be some academic worth –’

‘There is no comparison between what happened here and what happened on my world. I know that many of you collaborated with the enemy.’

Bernice drew Ovmakh aside. ‘Careful what you say around here. You won’t be welcome for much longer if you start accusing people of collaboration.’

‘It is true,’ said Ovmakh. ‘But you had a choice. We did not.’

Bernice felt that she had to explain herself to Ovmakh, make her see the complexity of Collection life during the Occupation. ‘We didn’t collaborate to help the enemy, we did it to survive!’ She thought of the extraordinary lengths Jason had gone to to protect the children, her mistrust of him before the truth had emerged. Thought of herself deciding to preserve the Collection rather than help evict the Axis. Thought of Anson, Moskof – and Spang. She sighed.

How to explain it to someone who wasn’t there? ‘We did what we had to do to go on living. Many of us resisted, too – and in the end, we’re still here. We came through it.’

‘The end justifies the means?’

‘In this case, yes. We were on the side of good – as you well know, being a victim of the Axis yourself.’

Ovmakh regarded her steadily, her pupils dilating. ‘You collaborated in order to survive,’ she stated. ‘Something we Vellophoi could never do. We’re not human, like you, like the Axis. Some of us tried – but they spat on us. They imprisoned us. Enslaved us. Tortured us.’

Bernice noticed, for the first time, that below Ovmakh’s incongruous

quiff, there was no fur, and the skin was scarred as if it had been burned.

She realised then how it must seem to Ovmakh. But still... ‘Look, this isn’t a competition to see who suffered most under the Axis. There are no prizes for this. Suffering is relative. It happened here too, happened to people I love. The father of my child – he’s a Killoran.’

‘But you collaborated, and were able to resist, to help your alien friends. We Vellophoi had no such help. You were lucky to be of the same race as the Axis,’ said Ovmakh. It allowed you to survive. Many of my people did not. Many of my friends.’

Suddenly Bernice realised what it was Ovmakh had against her. ‘So you resent me because of something I can’t help, can’t change? Being human?’

‘Of course not. That would make me as bad as the enemy. No, Professor Summerfield, since you ask, I simply deplore your frivolous, populist approach to your subject. How much have you actually achieved this year? Some dashed-off papers? I heard about your excursion. How did you get away with that? And I bet your lectures are made up as you go. Your paper on Martian funeral rites last year owed a lot to my own published research – a fact you’ve been able to disguise because I didn’t publish my work in English. You’re not an academic. You’re a joyrider.’

Bernice was speechless.

Then Ovmakh inclined her head and half closed her feline eyes. ‘I, however, being professional, will put such feelings aside and work with you for the rest of this conference.’

With that, Ovmakh turned and walked off.

Bernice shouted after her. ‘If you’ve suffered so much, why the hell do you study “martial archaeology”? Why not just put it all behind you – like we were trying to do, until you lot showed up?’

Ovmakh turned. ‘Because I chose to want to.’

Something about that sounded odd, but Bernice put it aside for now. ‘Can’t you change?’

Ovmakh bared her teeth, and then was gone.

‘Well done, Bernice.’ Braxiatel’s voice, close behind her.

Bernice didn’t even bother to look at him.

Bernice came to with a thump. Hello hangover. Not helped by Peter climbing all over her suffering frame as she clung desperately to the duvet.

In the end, of course, she had to get up and make breakfast – for Peter, as she couldn’t face solid food herself. Jason wasn’t around – presumably already sucked into the day’s vortex of admin hell. Bernice made some coffee and began to piece together her memories

of the previous night. The argument with Ovmakh/drink/Braxiatel telling her to make efforts to get on better with their distinguished guest/drink/Bernice telling Braxiatel where to shove it/drink/dancing/snogging/drink/fried egg sandwich/oblivion.

Bernice stared morosely at the remains of the fried egg sandwich on the floor. 'Frivolous and populist, am I?' she muttered. 'Joyrider indeed... I'll show her.'

She stood up, resolving to start work on her paper immediately.

Half an hour and two measly paragraphs later Bernice decided that a walk around the grounds would help to clear her head.

She found herself drawn to the excavations by the Garden of Whispers.

Another tunnel had been driven, a hundred metres back from the original, its entrance marked by another of the geodesic tents. The huge piles of earth around it indicated that this was a very deep one indeed.

Bernice wandered up to the tent. There was a lone Vellophoi inside. He looked surprised to see her.

'It takes more than a bathful of booze to floor me,' said Bernice, ignoring the thumping in her head. 'Where's the Professor?'

The Vellophoi pointed at the tunnel.

Bernice climbed down the vertical shaft – it went a long way, and ended in a low, blue-lit tunnel. This led in turn to another circular chamber. Inside she found Ovmakh overseeing a team of Vellophoi clearing away earth from the centre of the chamber. A few of Bernice's students were helping and looked up to say hi.

Ovmakh turned and smiled at Bernice. 'Professor Summerfield! You're just in time. A new find!'

Clearly Ovmakh had forgotten her resentment of Bernice – at least for now.

Bernice peered over the shoulders of the diggers. She saw they were working with trowels, and smiled. 'What is it?'

'We don't know yet.'

Bernice hunkered down next to the Vellophoi, who politely made space for her. Close up, she noticed, they had a curious piney scent.

One of them handed her a trowel and Bernice began to scrape carefully at the ground in front of her. A circular space about a metre across had been cleared. The object they'd detected was somewhere beneath this.

Bernice worked in silence for some minutes, absorbed in the task, trying to keep down her apprehension of what it was they'd found. Then one of the Vellophoi grunted in surprise.

A gleam of metal showed through the brown earth.

Hands replaced trowels and the mud was smoothed away to reveal a metal globe about the size of a football. Lights on its surface pulsed with a heartbeat rhythm.

Bernice sat back on her haunches. 'Shit!'

'What is it?' asked Ovmakh.

Bernice craned her neck to look at her. 'It's a transmitter and it's been sending for Goddess knows how long, and now that it knows we've uncovered it, it will probably self-destruct.'

Ovmakh blinked. 'Are you sure?'

'Do you want to hang around to find out?' Bernice stood, dragging the Vellophoi next to her up with her. 'Everyone, leave, now!' she yelled.

No-one moved.

'Now!'

Bernice's students were the first to move – scrambling in panicky haste past the Vellophoi, who had stood up and were looking at Ovmakh for guidance.

'How long?' said Ovmakh.

'I don't bloody know! Will you lot please just move!' Bernice shoved one of the Vellophoi into the tunnel, and the others began to follow, with a maddening lack of haste.

Ovmakh was still staring at the transmitter.

'Come on!' cried Bernice, dragging her into the plastic-walled tunnel.

'Team, move out!' shouted Ovmakh.

The Vellophoi began to run, with long loping strides. Some of them emitted high-pitched barks of panic which hurt Bernice's ears. At least they were now alive to the danger. Beyond them, she could see the last of her students hauling themselves up the ladder, hear them shouting warnings. Then she cannoned into Ovmakh.

'Why the – why have you stopped?'

Ovmakh grabbed her arms, the claws digging in through Bernice's top. 'We must go back – try to defuse it – save it!'

Her cat-like eyes were wide with fear – not for herself, Bernice realised, but for the possibility of losing her find.

'Are you *mad*?' screamed Bernice.

Then there was a burst of white light, a clap of subterranean thunder and the planetoid fell in on top of them.

Bernice came to for the second time that day, but this was no hangover. She couldn't move, except her right arm. She couldn't see. There was something pressing down on her, crushing her.

What had happened?

Butterflies of images flitted through her mind, the only light in the

darkness, and coalesced into a point of light. A trowel. Silver and glinting in blue light... no, more than one... then – oh Goddess, the transmitter! She tried to sit up, couldn't, and cried out. She reached up with her right hand, and felt a ceiling of crinkly plastic about a foot away from her face. Was that all that was holding the ceiling up? The rest of her, apart from her head and upper chest, was trapped under a fall of mud. When she inhaled, her chest hurt 'Professor Ovmakh?'

'Yes?'

'Are you injured?'

'No.'

'Pity... you almost got us killed. Correction: probably have got us killed.'

Silence.

'An apology would be nice – ow!' A surge of pain shot up from the centre of her chest, along her jaw and down her left arm. Goddess – was she going to have a heart attack? Die down here? Her eyes filled with tears and she grimaced.

'Are you injured?'

'Probably,' gasped Bernice. 'Chest hurts – hope it's just heartburn. Ah –'

'Professor Summerfield, try not to panic,' said Ovmakh, her voice low and almost purring. 'We'll just have to wait – the others will have told everyone what happened. They'll be able to get to us using the excavator.'

'Well they'd better be – ah – quick.'

Bernice thought of Peter, safe on the surface. Or was he?

Her mind swam. How long had that transmitter been sending? Perhaps uncovering it had sent a signal, and they'd teleported down – perhaps the star forces were already engaged in battle – another invasion – war – occupation –

Another burst of pain.

Goddess. She didn't want to die, not like this, not in a stupid accident. Not after she'd been through so much, for herself and Peter and Jason.

'Do you have children?' she found herself saying.

'No.'

Bernice closed her eyes, not that it made any difference. She thought of the Axis occupation of Vellophon, Ovmakh's pain and anger in Cafe Vosta. 'Shit. Look, I'm sorry, I should have thought.'

'I can't have children.'

Bernice bit her lip. 'I'm so sorry.'

Silence, except for their laboured breathing.

Then Ovmakh sighed. 'No, I'm sorry. I'm teasing you. I chose not to have children.'

‘Oh. Right’ So the Vellophoi did have a sense of humour. Rather sick and at the expense of others, but at least it was there. ‘Chose not to?’

‘Yes. If you’d done your research on us, you’d know all about our biology.’

‘Well, I’m not a xenologist – ah!’ This time the pain arced around her skull.

‘Ever met Hamilton Smith? You’d get on like a house... like... a...’ Bernice groaned. She suddenly felt very sleepy.

‘Try to focus, Professor Summerfield.’ Ovmakh sounded like an irate teacher.

‘Can’t,’ muttered Bernice. ‘House on – fire.’

‘Listen to me,’ barked Ovmakh. ‘We Vellophoi are born into full consciousness and self-awareness. As we only live for fifteen or twenty of your years, we cannot afford to waste our lives. We therefore choose our vocations and plan our lives, and genetically enhance our bodies and minds to best fit those choices. I was interested in conflict – why two people fight, why wars happen – I wanted to make sense of it, so I devoted myself to the study of it. Are you still with me?’

‘Yeah...’ Bernice felt her mind working around Ovmakh’s words. She remembered what Ovmakh had said in the cafe: I chose to want to. ‘What if you change your mind later in life?’

‘Why would I want to? It’s all part of the programming. You don’t want to change.’

It sounded a horribly circumscribed life to Bernice. But then Ovmakh seemed content with it. No wonder she seemed so unprofessional to the genetically programmed Ovmakh.

‘You said you had a child – half-Killoran, half-human. What’s it like?’

‘Painful. Beautiful,’ Bernice slurred. She was starting to feel woozy again.

‘Tell me all about him. What he likes to eat, what he likes to do...’

The pain came again. Bernice couldn’t bring herself to talk about Peter. ‘If I die down here... without seeing him again, without knowing he’s safe... ah!

‘Professor Summerfield!’ barked Ovmakh.

Agonising, body-twisting pain circled her chest. She was being crushed by a giant hand made of mud. Then daggers of light shot into her head and –

She woke to find herself in her own bed. The first face she saw was Jason’s.

The first thing she said was, ‘Is Peter okay?’

‘Yeah, he’s fine.’

Then she blacked out again.

When she woke up there was no one there. She tried to get out of bed couldn't move. She cried out, and suddenly Jason was there. 'Hey...'

He hugged her carefully.

'We got to you just in time,' said Jason. 'We used the Vellophoi excavator to get to you. Amazing piece of technology!'

There was no pain anywhere. Bernice felt numb all over. 'What happened to me? Did I have a heart attack?'

'Minor one, caused by the pressure on your ribcage. But we've fixed you up, your heart's as good as new.'

Bernice closed her eyes. She suddenly felt naked, mortal.

'Ovmakh... did she make it?'

'Yeah, she's okay, and there were no other casualties. They're quite resilient, these Vellophoi.'

'I take it that this means the conference is over.'

'Oh, no,' said Jason wearily. 'Brax is insisting it carries on. But you're excused from it – you have to rest and recover.'

Bernice closed her eyes again, and groaned. She didn't want this – now, oddly, she wanted to get involved. But it looked like she didn't have any choice.

Braxiatel came to visit, and he seemed genuinely worried about her. His taking her condition seriously told her just how close she had come. But once he was satisfied she was on the mend, he seemed much more chirpy, and told her that, before it had self-destructed, the transmitter had indeed been sending – but it was damaged, and the artificial gravity field around the planetoid had bounced its signals back to their source.

'What about the robotisation unit? Is Ovmakh taking it?'

Braxiatel looked away just for a second, and she realised.

'You're keeping it, aren't you?' she said, sourly.

'Professor Ovmakh will have access to study it for as long as she wishes.'

Bernice let that pass. 'Did you plan all this, Brax? I think you owe it to me to tell me if you did.'

Braxiatel sighed. 'The conference was my idea, but Professor Ovmakh approached me about the dig. I thought it would be a rather neat way of finding out if anything had been left behind.'

'That's it? Nothing else?'

'Not according to Ovmakh's scans.'

'That's not what I meant,' she said.

'Bernice, you're going to have to trust me. We're friends, aren't we?'

She looked at him for a long time. 'So we can put it all behind us – finally.'

Braxiatel smiled.

Professor Ovmakh came to see her.

‘You’re looking well,’ said Bernice.

‘I have recovered, thank you. And you?’

‘I’ll survive,’ said Bernice. By this time she could move: sit up and read, sip from a beaker, work. ‘You realise you almost got us both killed? What made you want to go back?’

‘A mistake. My – professional pride got in the way of common sense. I should have listened to you.’

‘Yeah, well we’re through it now.’

‘It is a shame that you’re not able to give your paper. I would have been interested to hear it.’

Despite the formality of her words, there was genuine warmth in her voice.

Bernice nodded to the papers on her bedside table.

‘It’s coming along, though,’ she said, i can’t remember ever feeling such a need just to write. I’ll send you a copy – I gather you’re here for a while.’

Ovmakh nodded, slowly, not denying it.

‘You could do us a favour,’ said Bernice. ‘Destroy that robotisation unit. I hate the thought of it still existing... if it fell into the wrong hands...’

Ovmakh shook her head. ‘You know I can’t do that. I have no choice.’

Bernice felt sorry for Ovmakh then, but didn’t say anything. Her sympathy would probably be wasted anyway.

Ovmakh held out her hand. The claws were sheathed. ‘I hope we have the opportunity to work together again.’

They shook hands, and then Ovmakh was gone. Bernice picked up the papers beside her, and started to work.

Fragments

By Stewart Sheargold

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1404567. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

... gently woke to a warm spring morning. A sliver of sunshine spilled in through the curtains and touched her face. She yawned and stretched, gathering the pieces of herself together that had grown indistinct while she slept. She would need to shower before she felt ready to combat the morning but at least it was going to be a beautiful day. She marvelled that she didn't have a headache what with the raucous celebrations of the previous night. With that thought she suddenly remembered: I'm supposed to be breakfasting with Justin! Groaning, she fumbled for the bedside clock, and seeing how late it was she groaned that bit louder.

Slipping from the sheets and into a silk gown, she padded her way to the French doors and flung them open. The sunshine stole in like a thief and took every corner of dark. It also woke her up sufficiently to let her gaze out into the day; she stepped onto the balcony, the stone cold on her naked feet. Her room overlooked a courtyard of flowers, many of which had been planted by her art students in an attempt by her to explain the harmonious grouping of colours. It was the middle of spring and they bloomed profusely – tulips and hyacinth, pansies and violets, bluebells and anemones. As she stood there, soaking up the sun, she felt renewed, as though full of strength and goodness after plentiful hard work. Of late she had thought of giving up teaching, and returning to her first love of painting; she felt stifled with academia, frustrated by having to curb all the possible visions for an artwork that flowed in her head. She was hard-pressed to admit it but she wasn't that adept a teacher, always subverting her own lessons with glibness and wry humour; she wanted to be the student.

But this was the day! This day; this day she felt was going to hinge on something special; there was a tangible sense of transition in the air, a delicious edge of uncertainty. She smiled with a sudden rush of happiness and went back into her immaculately kept rooms.

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1443200. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON

LOAN.

With the top down and the wind racing through her short bob, she felt completely free from all restrictions, as if she simply weren't herself anymore. She shot a look at Jonathan through her Earhart goggles, clearly in his element in the driver's seat, spinning and skidding them through the tiny cobbled streets of the city, forcing skittish pedestrians to run for cover. This is how he always made her feel; he was the magician who, with a flourish, made all the bright, fun things appear in her life. He was the life she was attempting to regain, in snatched pieces of glory. She remembered midnight skinny-dipping in the University lake and racing back to her rooms when the prowling porters almost caught them; she remembered picnicking on a haystack in the countryside and Jonathan accidentally setting it alight when he dropped his cigarette. Sometimes she thought she would burst from being so happy when she was with him, sometimes they didn't even have to speak to one another to enjoy the camaraderie between them. Yet always there was a space that separated them, and she knew that the cause of it was her fault. It made its presence felt as a coldness, the ice in her guilty touch, the chill in a glance. Shucking off such maudlin thoughts (and she was, ominously, predisposed to those) she turned to Jonathan.

'Where on earth did you get this wonderful car?' She squeezed the red leather upholstery with pleasure.

'A close friend lent it to me.'

Berny raised an eyebrow dubiously 'I didn't think you had any close friends.'

Jonathan glanced at her sheepishly. 'Well, he's an acquaintance who's about to become a friend. I sort of... borrowed the car.'

Berny laughed. 'You mean you're going to smarm him with some scheme to get out of being punished for stealing it!'

'It's worked before!' Jonathan grinned like a loon and Berny immediately wanted to kiss him.

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1522702. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

.. .and so after all they had been through, Betty decided to cook dinner for him. Perhaps it would make him come out of his shell. She didn't really know what he liked to eat – he had never told her – but being a large, strapping man, corded tight with muscle, she thought a meaty stew might be appropriate. And vegetables, for colour. She was one for colour, even in her cooking there was an artistry, left over from her painting days. She still hadn't managed to sell that painting,

kept it under the stairs now, gathering dust. Occasionally she would take it out and wonder what her life might have been like had it followed another tangent; perhaps she might have been famous, had clever books written about little old her, or held great art shows in which her work was discussed with reverence?

Perhaps not. She had been mistress of her fate, had decided that long ago, so she had no one to blame but herself for ending up here.

There were three smart raps on the door.

She opened it. And there he was, in his uniform, looking swarthy and steadfast. He had brought her flowers – red roses; she supposed it was the done thing for lovers, but lilies would have been more suitable. She invited him in. He did not kiss her.

They went directly to the table and sat down. She put the flowers in a vase.

‘What did you cook?’ he asked.

‘A beef stew,’ she said.

‘My favourite,’ he said.

She smiled, grateful for his frankness. There was a short silence, as heavy as the memory of what had passed between them.

‘I was at the hospital today,’ he said.

She was instantly alert and anxious, but tried not to show it, ‘Oh? Why?’

‘I cut my hand.’ He held up a bandage-swathed paw. ‘I... I couldn’t help but pass her room.’

‘Oh, Allan...’ she murmured. Before tears could well in the corner of her eyes, she pulled herself together, went for the bubbling stew.

She spooned the thick mixture onto a plate, carefully placed the vegetables in sections of colour.

‘It looks nice,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she agreed.

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1483859. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

They were seated at the front window which looked out onto the street and all the bustle and bang of the day. Passers-by passed by, glancing in at them. Berny felt awfully privileged, as though only she were allowed to experience this luxury. She was happy to be here, with Justin. Not wanting to be separated even by the table, she touched him underneath, on the leg. He sat upright, and glanced at her mischievously.

‘Why Berny, I thought that was to wait until after breakfast.’ Then his face soured as his attention shifted across the room.

‘What is it?’ she asked, and tried to glance casually over her shoulder.

‘Don’t look!’ he hissed, agitated. He hunched down in his seat, using her body as a shield. He looked at her. It’s that bloody Sterling Shadowfell, influential executive for Trianon Films. He’s out to have the entire film world, and he’s made no secret of his dislike of us actors. He’s collaborating with the big movie moguls for control. But we won’t let him. We’re staging a protest outside the studio. Oh no.... He’s coming over’ Justin hurriedly picked up a menu to hide behind.

A short portly man in an ill-fitting grey suit waddled over to their table.

‘Ah, Justin, how nice to see you,’ his tone was sarcastic, ‘I trust we’ll be having no more trouble from that group of yours,’ he made it sound like he’d cured a disease. ‘I’m afraid I had the police arrest one of them this morning; they were trying to paint-splatter my home. Such a childish technique.’

Justin glanced up, but not too far, into Sterling’s cold grey eyes. ‘Well, I know a lot about art, and I know what I like. Perhaps you’re just too old-fashioned, Sterling. Look to the future, ’cause that’s where we’ll be, without you standing here like some two-bit censor.’ He was becoming quite heated. ‘You may want to control us but you can’t take our creativity, you can’t take what’s in my head.’

Sterling smiled carefully. ‘Can’t I? I’ve found there’s a price for absolutely everything. I doubt you’d be very costly at all.’

Justin seethed.

Having provoked the desired reaction, Sterling turned to Berny. ‘But enough of these games. I was intrigued to see you with such a beautiful, intelligent,’ – he made a point of that one – ‘young lady.’

‘Forgive me if I don’t introduce you,’ Justin said with bad grace, then added, ‘You can’t have her either.’

Berny shifted uncomfortably, then deeming it polite, held out her hand.

‘Bernadette Winterson.’ Justin was frowning at her, angry at her civility to Sterling. ‘Arm apparel to Mister King here, apparently. My friends call me Berny,’ she added, flashing her eyes at Justin in challenge.

Sterling took her proffered hand and kissed it. ‘In that case I shall call you Bern...’

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1553167. UNCOVERED I N THE RUINS O F KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

It was late. Everyone had gone home for the day. So they decided to

have a picnic on the gallery floor, surrounded on all sides by gesturing statues and flamboyant paintings. Beatrice hadn't done this since she was a girl. Sterling had suggested it that afternoon, as they argued over which of her art pieces should be included in the exhibition. Now they sat here with cheeses and spreads and hors d'oeuvres amongst an arbour of art.

'This is pleasant, isn't it?' he said. 'A viewing without any pesky tourists.'

Beatrice agreed around a mouthful of biscuit.

'Now, I think we should definitely hang yours front and centre, to hit people as they come in. That would be best.' He gave her a smile and a nod, as though he expected to be obeyed in all things.

She frowned. Sometimes, he treated her, his very own apprentice, like one of the pieces of art he had bought – 'property of a gentleman'. She hated the idea that he was keeping her safe and secure, within his reach and out of harm's way, padded against knocks. Though she was pleased at his apparent solicitations.

Sterling noticed her concern. 'You don't agree? I only say so because I think your art is very personal, and yet says many things to people. It's universal. It's important.'

She stifled a giggle.

'What?' he said, slightly affronted.

'What do you think they're about?' she asked, with a hint of mirth in her tone, as though he, with all his myriad knowledge, could never know.

He gazed sardonically at her for a moment. 'Well, I think they're...'

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1553167. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

...the protest had swelled to an unmanageable rabble, supplemented primarily by intrigued then disgusted pedestrians. Berny found herself surrounded on all sides by people yelling vociferously to bolster a cause they weren't completely acquainted with. Though she was happy for the support, she was becoming unsettled at the fierce mood of the crowd.

More security guards had lined the gate, some with dogs. They looked anxious and scared at being confronted by this loud, unpredictable beast.

She wondered how she'd become mixed up in this.

Neve Warrent, Justin's twice leading lady, turned to her with a shaky smile, 'Let's see if we can get out of this,' and took Berny's arm. She had evidently been ruffled by the turn in the crowd's behaviour.

Berny searched for Justin but he was nowhere to be seen. They endeavoured to make a path through the fray but the crowd, as one, suddenly seized this moment to surge forward and they were pushed back. Berny and Neve were pressed uncomfortably against the steel bars. Neve, aware of the danger of being crushed, tried to shield them with her placard before it broke in two.

A young man rattled the gate and then began to climb it. This was evidently too much of a provocation for a large black Alsatian straining at his leash. He leapt forward, out of his handler's grip, and, barking madly, attacked the young man through the bars. The crowd, seeing this, rushed the gate to help him. The guards, at this wall of violence, released the other dogs.

Pinned to the gate, unable to move, Berny could only watch as a dog, teeth bared, leapt for her. She was yanked backward just in time, the animal clanging against the bars. She turned to find Allan holding her forcibly. He looked both concerned and angered. Before she could wonder what he was doing here he immediately shouldered a path through the increasingly ugly crowd, dodging the odd punch thrown, his uniform making him a target. Berny clasped his hand tightly. It seemed to take forever to emerge from the melee, and she gasped in relief when they were free.

She looked back and saw, with amazement and dismay, that the entire road was blocked in both directions for a hundred metres. The gate was clogged with people. The guards used batons to discourage them from climbing over. There was a sound of broken fingers in yells and screams.

Berny looked at Allan. 'Thank you,' she said. She still held his hand. He merely nodded. A figure raced up to her, 'Are you all right?' he asked, glancing suspiciously at Allan. Justin looked particularly dishevelled, his shirt ripped, his lip bleeding; 'I've been trying to find you.'

'I'm fine,' she said.

'We should get out of here,' suggested Neve.

'We should stop this. We can't let it get violent. People might get hurt,' said Berny.

'It's already violent,' Justin replied, ruefully rubbing a swelling lip.

'It shouldn't always have to end in fighting!' Berny frowned.

'You can't control everything. No matter how much you might want to.'

Allan let go of her hand. Berny felt adrift without his solid connection.

There was a sudden elated cry from the crowd. The gate was opening.

People poured like running water through the breach. They were all

swept up in the rush of noise and action; Berny rolled off people as though picked and tossed by raging combers. The dogs were loose, snapping at ankles; fisticuffs were engaged. The first bottle struck. Justin fell. Berny yelled at Allan to stop dragging her away. Justin sat woozily amidst the chaos, a trickle of blood dribbling from his scalp.

‘Help me!’ Berny shouted.

Allan frowned, clearly annoyed, then manhandled Justin roughly to his feet, and clamping a hand to Berny’s arm, pulled them from the scene, suffering glancing blows.

They sheltered in a doorway well away from the fighting. Allan offered his handkerchief to Berny. She dabbed at the red stain on Justin’s head.

The actor smiled unsteadily at her and babbled, ‘Berny Winterson, I love you. I want you to be my wife.’ She paused and glanced knowingly at Allan, who’d stiffened. Justin tried, unsuccessfully, to muster a sombre gaze, ‘I want you to think better of me, Berny. I’m not always so frivolous. It’s just an act. I could be a good husband.’

The intensity of the fighting, sheer exhaustion and this emotive admission got the better of her and she burst into tears.

Allan, shocked by her display, fumbled with his fingers. Justin grasped at her hand, confused.

‘Oh, Justin! I love you too but I can’t marry you. I simply can’t,’ Berny sobbed.

‘Why not?’

She dried her eyes. She looked at Allan with tender melancholy. Justin noticed. ‘It’s him, isn’t it?’ His tone was hurt.

‘Yes. But it’s not...

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1598240. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

The bed was empty and that meant only one thing. Already a new sheet had been tucked and smoothed into place with precision folds. Betty screamed when she saw it, and fell onto the floor by the bed, like a chopped flower. Allan was just too slow to catch her. Her sobs echoed hollowly in the cold, white room. With great effort, she pulled herself to her feet, grasping the tidy bedsheet to help her, deliberately mangling it.

She turned on him. ‘Go on! Go on! Do something! Say something! Don’t just stand there like you always do, stoically, so nothing can touch you.’ She glared at him. Our daughter is dead. Don’t you understand that?’ She spelled it out, We can never see her again!’

‘I understand,’ he grumbled.

She shook her head, “I understand!” Just like you’re acquiescing to some military order. Well, I don’t understand you. I don’t understand why I let myself be convinced by you that we were a good idea. Patricia is dead because of you! You understand that?’ She was halfway across the room but was in his face.

‘I love you,’ he said, brokenly.

She reached him in three strides and slapped him, hard.

‘That’s all you can say?’ She paused, breathless. ‘I wish I’d never met you.

I wish I’d never had Patricia. I want my life back. I want my life back! Give me my life back!’ She dissolved into tears and fell against his chest, deep sobs pounding against his own booming heart. He held her.

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1605007. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

... it was all going well so far, thought Beatrice, as she sipped her wine and used the action as cover to gauge the reaction of those who were examining her paintings.

‘You need a refill; said a smooth, cultured voice beside her. She realised her glass was up in the air, attached to her mouth, and empty. How embarrassing. She quickly offered it up to Sterling’s bottle of champagne.

He poured, with some difficulty, reaching up to her glass; she consciously enjoyed having this one control over him, making him stretch up to her height. They clinked glasses in a toast, and sipped.

‘I wouldn’t worry,’ he placated her, ‘They’re saying very nice things about your paintings. Indeed, I believe you may come out of this well – they all want to buy one.’

She raised an eyebrow, amused. ‘How did you manage that?’

Sterling smiled, ‘I told them they weren’t for sale.’

‘You want to keep every little piece of me, don’t you?’ She suggested it lightly but saw him flinch, as though she had just discovered the very core of him.

He recovered well, and laughed. ‘But of course!’ He gave her the bottle.

‘Now, if you’ll excuse me...’ She nodded and let him go. She’d had him there, for just a moment.

Turning back to watch the critics at her paintings she realised there was a figure beside her. ‘Hello, Berny,’ he said.

‘My name is Beatrice,’ she stated. ‘Jonathan.’

He shook his head. ‘Yes, of course it is. I see you’re collaborating

with that scumbag Sterling Shadowfell. You realise what he's doing to the film industry?'

Beatrice was nonplussed. 'I'm sorry? Scumbag? Collaborating? *Film Industry*? I don't know what you're talking about. Sterling has never been involved in the film industry, indeed he thinks them a poor, diluted form of true art.'

Jonathan seemed to shrink. 'Oh? Really?'

The conversation had taken a very odd turn, almost as though she was not entirely sure what she was supposed to say or do next. She had been having thoughts of late that she was following a strange path, a path that was not her own. Almost as though she were being manipulated.

Sometimes she had these little turns, only small seconds, where she lost perception of exactly who she was. It was most unnerving. And 'Berny' had rung a bell.

Jonathan was looking at her. 'I saw your paintings.'

'Did you like them?'

'Hmm,' he sipped, 'But I don't get the picture of the small girl? Is she yours?'

She laughed. 'No. I don't have children.'

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1682367. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

... glared at her and she saw the distrust in his eyes.

'Allan and I... We have a child.' She covered her mouth as though she'd uttered a profanity. Allan touched her shoulder.

Justin gaped but before he could say a word, she continued. 'It was a few years ago... I thought I'd never see you again. It was the most horrible time. I wasn't myself at all. And Allan came along when I was in direst need.'

She paused, seeing him shrinking further away from her with every word. But she had to tell him everything. 'He... comforted me. I didn't mean to fall pregnant, but I did. I have a daughter. Her name is Patricia.'

She smiled and tears flowed; Allan's face crumpled. She is so weak that she remains constantly in hospital, fed on drips. We... we don't know how long she'll live.' She stopped, tears running down her face like cold rain.

Justin's hostility had faded. He was sympathetic when he asked, 'How old is she?'

Berny gave a wavering smile, unable to answer for more tears.

'Six,' said Allan brokenly.

Justin opened his mouth but realised there was nothing more to say. The fighting was finally breaking up and despite the ruckus he felt pummelled and bruised. He imagined Berny and Allan felt much the same, holding onto this for years. But she loved him, that was something worthy in his life of theatrical falsities. He pulled himself painfully to his feet, his head dulled as a bell ringing far away. He was going to have a severe headache, 'I think I'm going to need somebody to drive me home,' he said. Berny sniffed, Allan smiled grudgingly.

One arm over Allan's shoulder, one on Berny's, the three of them...

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1638821. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

... all to dinner this time. They arrived, one after the other, almost exactly ten minutes apart. She'd made a feast for four. A roast, as though it were a family Sunday dinner. After half an hour, even with drinks, all the small talk had dried up. She suggested serving. They all took a side of the table and sat down. Justin sat at the other end to Sterling, though he was clearly uncomfortable by Allan's close and considerable presence. Sterling remained tight-lipped, a forced civility in his features; he smiled only at her through his jowls. Justin fiddled with an earlobe, and glared occasionally, when he thought she wasn't looking; he fingered his knife.

He could have cut the heavy atmosphere with it.

She quickly carved the roast into slices and laid it on plates, presenting the peas, the marrow, the carrots and the sprouts with a delicacy that she did not entirely feel. She added gravy and placed each plate in front of her guests with a smile. This simple act of cooking them all dinner, bringing them all together for a meal, seemed good to her. It may even get them talking again and bring some sense of resolution to her. Because it was she who needed it, and not them, though she would never have admitted this to anyone.

She sat herself, saying, 'Please, eat. It'll get cold.'

They each took up their utensils. They looked at one another. She waited for something to happen. Allan made the first slice into his meal.

They ate. Nobody said a word.

'Well...' she started...

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1722708. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

'... don't really hate him anymore but I just think it's better if he's

out of the way. You'll hate me for a while but eventually you'll come around. I still love you.'

Berny yelled and reached for the wheel. Justin pushed her back.

Allan stepped out into the road, rounding his car, a valet holding the door open for him.

'Always on time,' said Justin, with a short laugh.

'No! Allan!' Betty screamed.

Jonathan aimed the car so Allan was front centre and squeezed the accelerator. The car shot forward...

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1910640. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

... with a flourish. It's the final piece I need,' he said. 'What do you think?'

Beatrice looked at what Sterling had revealed, mouth agape in horror.

In a glass case, displayed with an explanatory plaque and lit softly like every other piece in the gallery, was the curled, white, dead form of her little girl.

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 1824299. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

Betty tried to pull Allan's massive hands away from her lover's throat but couldn't even gain leverage. He didn't bother to try and stop her. She pummelled him to no effect. Justin was turning a terrible red colour, the colour of Allan's straining hands, the colour of violence. His flailing arms were weakening.

'Stop it!' she yelled.

Allan looked at her, teeth gritted, 'I don't hate him. I just think it'd be better with just the two us.' He squeezed harder; Jonathan's gasp was like a bad engine rattle: broken, broken, broken. 'I love you, you see.'

'Stop it, please,' she said in a tiny, frightened voice.

But he didn't.

So Beatrice took his standard issue revolver and shot him with it.

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 2000003. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

... had let him. She didn't know why. She just had. It hadn't

mattered then. But it would. It would make a whole world of difference to her one day. Perhaps that is why she'd done it, for the future. It certainly wasn't because he was military. The uniform did nothing for her; she hated the military and their brutal policies and inhumane tactics. But Allan charmed her. She could tell he was a good man who, apart from his jealous and sometimes boorish nature, loved her. There was something between them that she could not quite fathom. He would always make sure she would do what was right. She wanted him near.

They did it in the back seat of his car, and his back had been broad and sweaty. She couldn't encapsulate him, enjoyed the vastness of him over her, submitted a little to the brute in him. Afterwards, they listened to the sea crash against the cliffs and he told her, 'I'll never let...'

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION R E F 2001723. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

She invited them all to dinner. She spiked the punch and that got them talking. There were arguments, but that was healthy. Things were brought out into the open. Sterling smiled, genuinely, and the coldness left his eyes. Justin laughed. Allan kissed her on the cheek.

They sat down to the meal she had cooked. It was a rather complicated terrine of three different layers but they complemented one another perfectly.

She cut a slice for each of them. Sterling poured the wine.

They ate, all exclaiming over the delicious meal, and asking for the recipe. She would not tell them.

'Well,' she said, isn't this pleasant?'

Bernice found Braxiatel in his study, feet up on a pouf, sipping tea and reading by lamplight. Suffused in such a glow, he looked like a particularly decadent angel in a painting.

The door was open so she marched in without knocking.

'Ah, Benny,' he sighed, without turning, 'How is the novel going?' He glanced quickly askance at her, then turned his eyes back to his book.

She stopped halfway across the room. 'What?' she asked, rather stupidly.

He frowned, gave a cursory look at his clock, as though he might have got the time wrong, and then, with a small shake of his head, smiled and turned to her. 'Would you like some tea?'

Her suspicions growing by the second, she slapped the folder down on his desk. 'What do you know about these?' she asked. She had

meant to sound more irritated but it came out as an enquiry.

Braxiatel raised an eyebrow at her method of delivery, carefully put down his book, and took up the folder. He scanned the documents inside. His face fell.

‘Ah, I see.’ He flicked quickly through them. ‘This has been misfiled. I shall have to speak sternly to someone about that.’

Benny sat down in the chair opposite, not saying a word, a finely etched eyebrow raised in question.

Braxiatel coughed, embarrassed. ‘I’m sorry, Benny. These really shouldn’t have been –’

‘Where I could ever read them?’ she finished.

‘Indeed,’ he sympathised. This must have been... upsetting.’

‘Rather,’ she replied. There was an uncomfortable pause. Braxiatel spooned sugar into his tea. Benny glanced out of the window at the lush grounds, bursting with flowers.

Eventually, Braxiatel broke the silence. ‘I’m a completist, Benny.’

‘And you want to own every piece of me, eh?’

Braxiatel looked straight at her. ‘This isn’t about me. It’s about these words.’

‘Oh my whole life’s in words,’ she said. ‘It’s all in some book, some reference section. You only have to look. “It’s so nice to meet the Bernice Summerfield of *Down Among the Dead Men*”.’ That hadn’t meant to come out as bitterly as it had sounded. ‘Have you got me entirely catalogued somewhere in this Collection? Every action known?’

‘Of course not,’ he said gently.

‘It’s just...’

‘Yes?’ he said, encouraging.

‘I feel a little trapped by words at the moment.’ She softened, unable to remain annoyed with him for long, especially when he was so willing to give her his undivided attention; she realised that was a big thing for him. ‘And then I find these fragments, this novel that I am evidently going to write, amongst your books. Almost as though I were meant to find it, to spur me into writing the novel.’

Braxiatel smiled. ‘You decide to write a novel because you have already read the novel that you have written in the future.’ His smile stopped. ‘I’m not manipulating you, Benny. You’re my best friend.’

She looked into his cold, grey eyes and thought he might actually be telling the truth. ‘It’s just that everything I read in those pages seems to be what I am worrying about right now. And yet... there are warnings in there, too, aren’t there?’

‘Please,’ he said, ‘Tell me what’s wrong.’

The defensive barrier fell; she found herself blurting it all out. ‘Oh Brax! I’m stuck in an occupational hazard. When you’re an

archaeologist the hazard is that you end up just another stuffy academic spouting some old anecdotes and writing papers on digs that you only half-remember you were on a lifetime ago.' She sighed. 'This year has been amazing. I've done so much. But I'm not sure it's what I want to do. I'm not sure I could cope with more words, more academia.' She gazed at him fondly, 'I understand what you've done, and thanks for making this the most secure place in all of space time in which to raise a... well, I guess you could call it a family. But I'm not an academic, I'm an archaeologist and the only excavating I'm doing is emotional! I need to get my hands dirty again!' She paused to gather herself then rushed on, afraid that if she stopped she might miss something important, 'All these words I've written, all these papers, all these fragments of my life, and none of them even comes close to getting me right. They contradict, they're muddled, they just don't mean anything!' She slumped in her seat with an explosive breath of air, glad that it was off her chest, that she had told him. He would know what to do to make it better.

Braxiatel was silent for a long while. The lamplight dimmed with the day's ending. Then he spoke, 'Many people have been affected by your words, Benny. This year alone you've enlightened civilisations through teaching pupils from far and wide. They've read your books, had your experiences, and that means something to them. It's all about interpretation. Remember that, Benny. Rest assured this year has not been wasted, neither on them nor yourself. It was simply a year of recuperation and achievement, if you like. Nobody is asking you to become a permanent fixture.'

He paused and made to consider. 'Perhaps you should join the students on their next excursion, have some time away.' He leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. 'And, as I said, there are some collectors out there who know of you and are such completists they have, most probably, gathered together every possible paper, every note, every fragment you have ever written.' He paused and added, cheekily, 'Or ever will write, perhaps?'

Bernice raised an eyebrow, amused. 'Oh? Why would they do that?'

Braxiatel cleared his throat and said, forthrightly, 'I imagine because you are a well-renowned -'

'Yes?' she milked it.

'Well-regarded -'

'Am I?'

'And highly important person,' he finished.

'Thank you,' she said.

'Apparently,' he added, seriously, though his eyes twinkled.

Bernice did not resist the smile that crept across her face. With that admission, everything seemed better all of a sudden. She did not exist

in her words, but rather in the spaces between them. She was Professor Bernice Summerfield, archaeologist and adventurer, and a force to be reckoned with.

‘So. Tea?’ Braxiatel asked.

She nodded. He poured and passed her a cup. It steamed pleasantly. She blew on it and then sipped. He picked up his own cup. They drank in silence.

Eventually, Benny looked at him, and noticed the book in his lap. ‘What are you reading?’ she asked innocently, though she had already guessed.

‘Oh this?’ He held it away from her so she couldn’t read the title.

‘A dynamic, confused but rather sweet little tale about a love triangle.’ He smiled knowingly at her.

She matched his stare. ‘But will it have a happy ending?’

Braxiatel drained his cup and carefully set it down on the table, prolonging the moment. ‘I don’t know,’ he answered. ‘I haven’t finished it yet.’

* * * *

TEXT FRAGMENT. BRAXIATEL COLLECTION REF 2250212. UNCOVERED IN THE RUINS OF KS-159 c.3610. AUTHOR UNKNOWN. RESTRICTED REFERENCE SECTION. CURRENTLY ON LOAN.

Beatrice carefully placed the bust of the Goddess back on its plinth. Red trickled slowly down its side. Such a beautiful colour – red for passion, for life, for violence. She stepped over the pool of violence spilling from Sterling’s head, the vegetable brain matter somehow darker, different to what she’d expected. She gently closed his eyes. He hadn’t seen that coming.

Standing, she went to the smashed glass cabinet. She reached in and took out her dead baby girl. She was light as air, practically nothing. But she was something to her. Something more than an artistic exhibit, something more than a card in the hand. She curled herself around the dead form of her little girl and held her. Sterling would not have her in a box. Her daughter was all she had left, everyone else was gone now.

So this was the future, she thought. And, involuntarily, she smiled.

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Simon Guerrier, August 2004

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